

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

Nov.
25¢

THE CONJURER
OF VENUS

by CONAN T. TROY



ENDLESS ROWS OF ALABASTER SHAPES, SITTING ON THEIR CHAIRS OF STONE, LOOKING TOWARD

SHANNACH-THE-LAST

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by LEIGH BRACKETT

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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 9

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1952

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Even in the grip of alien horror a man could not throw away his lifetime goal, nor stand by idly as endless rows of alabaster shapes, seated in their chairs of stone, ruled this gargoyle planet from the dead blackness of deep Mercurian caverns.

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THE VIZIGRAPH 2 & 109

Column upon column they stood hurling words of right and fright.

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Heat rays flickering about his hoary head, his frail and withered body unbelievably contorted by half a dozen force fields, his musculature rigid and his nerves screaming from a frightful overcharge, the beleaguered editor of PS once again rises from his dark cave and welcomes you to these sunny columns.

The VIZIGRAPH's next birthday cake shall be dented with thirteen candles. Way back in those dim days the editors set down a few letter-rules that still hold good: double-spaced, typewritten letters on one side of page only; limit, three pages. The acid-throwers are as welcome as the back-slappers (more so, in fact, when the criticism is solid and constructive.) Bite the editor, he's fair game and is rapidly developing the cornered-rat psychosis. But he's inoculated. Give the author his fair due, bite or pat, he well may benefit from your words. And your fellow-writers, bless 'em, are waiting, crouched, for your explosive outbursts. So roll 'em in and see what you win.

Letter victors in the September filly futurity are: (1) Mavis Hartman; (2) Helen Huber; (3) Marian Cox.

OUT OF 2952!

Am 1/c Edwin Corley
3860 Comp Gp
Gunter AFB, Alabama

Dear Ed,

Picked up the following gibberish on my crystal set the other night.

MUSIC: The earth moves.

DAN: Come in, come in, Fan. So you want to tell me about science-fiction, eh? Good. We'll sit down and discuss it in a calm fashion.

FAN: Good. That's all I want: an open mind. Just get rid of those false null-A theories, and—

DAN: Null-A? Oh, of course. Van Vogt.

FAN: Yeah. Now, listen, and I'll—

DAN: Personally, I thought his VOYAGE OF THE SPACE BEAGLE was a little weak . . . plot structure, you know.

FAN: Look, I thought you never read—

DAN: Stf mags? I don't, old bean, I don't—

FAN: Then let someone who knows what he's talking about tell you. Now, in STF, we got what are known as feuds. They're mostly between the fen, but sometimes a coupla writers get after each other—like the time Lewis Padgett and Henry Kuttner went gunning.

DAN: But, my dear Fan, that's quite impossible. Those two names are that of the same man—

FAN: Shaddup! Look, willya let me finish?

DAN: Sorry. Go on.

FAN: Also in fandom, we got a character known as Bradbury. This

same character has caused about as much disturbance as the atom bomb, and—

DAN: Wasn't that a shrewd trick Ray pulled? I mean, going on for years, writing what people thought were merely excellent short stories, and then, bingo! Put them end to end and he's got a book. Two books.

FAN: (*Turning just a little green*) Arrrgggghhh... DAN: Sorry, old boy. Continue.

FAN: (*Idly fingering a sledge hammer*) Also in science-fiction, we got great controversies, like, do we put the females on the cover or don't we.

DAN: Well?

FAN: Huh?

DAN: Do we or don't we?

FAN: Do we or don't we what?

DAN: Put females on.

FAN: Wotthehell are you talking about? You put onna shirt, but you don't put on females!

DAN: Not even on the covers?

FAN: Oh, so you're one of those, eh? Wanna turn stf into Sexy Space Stories! I oughta—

DAN: My dear Fan, forgive me. I know not what I do. Go on, tell me what science-fiction is.

FAN: Now you're cooking! Science-fiction is—

DAN: Personally, I would say that stf is the most ambitious form of writing ever produced. I mean: hundreds of creative minds, all taking the same starting point, the same initial spark, and developing it. And you know what that spark is, old bean? Two words: WHAT IF? Wouldn't you say, Fan, old boy, that those two words are behind every science-fiction story ever written? Yes, I can easily see why STF holds a great attraction for thinking, searching minds! But, you know, Fan, there's something beyond the mere stories that holds an even greater appeal for me: the completely honest friendship of this particular group of magazines. I mean, COLLIER'S won't admit a rival slick ever prints anything but THE ROMANCE OF HELEN TRENT. Ditto for the rest, from SATEVE POST to MUDVILLE MEANDERINGS. And, to NEWSWEEK, TIME is just something none of us have enough of. But, Fan, what do you see in the STF and fantasy magazines? Constant references to other competitive magazines—and not shurring comments, but genuine admiration and appreciation of talent and creativeness, from GALAXY and ASTOUNDING to FUTURE and PLANET. Wouldn't you say that such over-all friendship and democratic thinking-habits help make for a greater freedom of imagination?

FAN: (*Swatting himself over the head with the sledge*) Dammit! I thot you said you didn't read STF mags!

DAN: Aha! No, dear Fan, I don't—for I am from the year 2952. There, we read only NON-Science-fiction mags!

SOUND: Pfffffft! (As of Dan returning to 2952, hotly pursued by the originator of this particular gag.)

Still with me? Your July issue was pretty good; wish you'd take Murphy off the covers and give him some interiors—he always reproduces well on your paper. Congrats to Phil Dick for BEYOND LIES THE WUB. And an idle thought just struck me: what ever happened to Nelson Bond and his ballads? I remember them as being closely akin to some of Service's best.

Thanks to all the fen who voted for me last time. And those who wrote me. I'll answer all letters, but a sample copy of all fazines, so how about it? Oh, yes,

give pics to Budrys—for treading where, etc.; Johnson for being an honest reader, and not a frustrated science-fictioneer (even as you and I?); and to Martin Gross, because it might make him take off his purple glasses the next time the keeper lets him out. So long till next time.

EDWIN CORLEY

P. S. I'll take the pic on page 30 from the May ish.

Ed's note: Pick another, Ed. Digger's don gone.

STARDOM, AT LAST

Box 611
Winters, Texas

Dear Editor,

I've been rather busy of late and I just usually throw all the STF-mags I buy back into the corner to be dug out and later read with ease and pleasure. So, I don't know if this letter will reach you in time for your next issue or not. Neither do I care.

The first STF-mag I ever bought was PLANET and that was by accident at the early age of fourteen. I enjoyed the stories so much that I bought all of the magazines with the funny names on the newsstand and I've been buying them ever since. Reading them, too, I might add.

But I believe that once in every man's lifetime he finds his goal, that object for which he aims all his life. It has always been a subconscious urge of mine to find a story worth writing about to the editor.

Mr. Sullivan with the O' in front, I've found that story!

Charles Dye wrote one of the best stories I've ever read. His lead novel, THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS, surprised me near out of my hide. I never expected to see a story with this theme, a real honest to goodness classic, in PLANET!

The novels and stories you've been printing were all good, up to a certain extent, but nothing like this thriller! How about giving notice at the start of VIZIGRAPH just when, where, and how this novel is going to be put in book form.

Because I have a feeling within myself that this story will go down in STF-history as a story equal to anything ever published by GALAXY, UNKNOWN, AMAZING, or ASTOUNDING.

Many happy congratulations for a well-remembered story.

Charles Dye receives my vote along with Walter M. Miller, Jr., as the two top story tellers of the year.

Yours,

CLAUDE HALL

DOG OF THE MOON

4736 Drexel Blvd.
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Ed,

You know, I almost didn't buy the July PLANET. My money was running low, and I didn't see any names I liked on the contents page, so for almost a week I managed to resist you. You know what finally broke down my resistance? The Moondog on the cover. That BEM was so bad it was good, I couldn't even think about it without breaking into a gale of uncontrollable laughter.

Now I'm glad I did buy it.

I haven't yet finished the ish, but so far, so so. Mostly I'm raving about BEYOND LIES THE WUB. That ought to be anthologized. One of your competitors makes a specialty of strange fanciful critters,

(Continued on page 109)

The CONJURER of VENUS

By CONAN T. TROY

A world-famed Earth scientist had disappeared on Venus. When Johnson found him he found too the secret to that globe-shaking mystery—the fabulous Room of The Dreaming.

THE city dripped with rain. Crossing the street toward the dive, Johnson got rain in his eyes, his nose, and his ears. That was the way with the rain here. It came at you from all directions. There had been occasions when Johnson had thought the rain was falling straight up. Otherwise, how had the insides of his pants gotten wet?

On Venus, everything came at you from all directions, it seemed to Johnson. Opening the door of the joint, it was noise instead of rain that came at him, the wild frantic beat of a Venusian rhumba, the notes pounding and jumping through the smoke and perfume clouded room. Feeling states came at him, intangible, but to his trained senses, perceptible emotional nuances of hate, love, fear, and rage. But mostly love. Since this place had been designed to excite the senses of both humans and Venusians, the love feelings were heavily tinged with straight sex. He sniffed at them, feeling them somewhere inside of him, aware of them but aware also that here was apprehension, and plain fear.

Caldwell, sitting in a booth next to the door, glanced up as Johnson entered but neither Caldwell's facial expression or his eyes revealed that he had ever seen this human before. Nor did Johnson seem to recognize Caldwell.

"Is the mighty human wanting liquor, a woman or dreams?" His voice was all soft syllables of liquid sound. The Venusian equivalent of a headwaiter was bowing to him.

"I'll have a tarmur to start," Johnson said. "How are the dreams tonight?"

"Ze vill be the most wonderful of all sonight. The great Unger hisself will be here to do ze dreaming. There is no ozzer one who has quite his touch at dreaming,

mighty one." The headwaiter spread his hands in a gesture indicating ecstasy. "It is my great regret that I must do ze work tonight instead of being wiz ze dreamers. Ah, ze great Unger hisself!" The headwaiter kissed the tips of his fingers.

"Um," Johnson said. "The great Unger!" His voice expressed surprise, just the right amount of it. "I'll have a tarmur to start but when does the dreaming commence?"

"In one zonar or maybe less. Shall I make ze reservations for ze mighty one?" As he was speaking, the headwaiter was deftly conducting Johnson to the bar.

"Not just yet," Johnson said. "See me a little later."

"But certainly." The headwaiter was gone into the throng. Johnson was at the bar. Behind it, a Venusian was bowing to him. "Tarmur," Johnson said. The green drink was set before him. He held it up to the light, admiring the slow rise of the tiny golden bubbles in it. To him, watching the bubbles rise was perhaps more important than drinking itself.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a soft voice said. He glanced to his right. A girl had slid into the stool beside him. She wore a green dress cut very low at the throat. Her skin had the pleasant tan recently on Earth. Her hair was a shade of abundant brown and her eyes were blue, the color of the skies of Earth. A necklace circled her throat and below the necklace . . . Johnson felt his pulse quicken, for two reasons. Women such as this one had been quickening the pulse of men since the days of Adam. The second reason concerned her presence here in this place where no woman in her right mind ever came unescorted. Her eyes smiled up at him unafraid. Didn't she know there were men present here in this space port city who



would snatch her bodily from the bar stool and carry her away for sleeping purposes? And Venusians were here who would cut her pretty throat for the sake of the necklace that circled it?

"They *are* beautiful," he said, smiling.

"Thank you."

"I was referring to the bubbles."

"You were talking about my eyes," she answered, unperturbed.

"How did you know? I mean . . ."

"I am very knowing," the girl said, smiling.

"Are you sufficiently knowing to be here?"

For an instant, as if doubt crossed her mind, the smile flickered. Then it came again, stronger. "Aren't you here?"

Johnson choked as bubbles from the tarmur seemed to go suddenly up his nose. "My dear child . . ." he sputtered.

"I am not a child," she answered with a firm sureness that left no doubt in his mind that she knew what she was saying. "And my name is Vee Vee."

"Vee Vee? Um. That is . . ."

"Don't you think it's a nice name?"

"I certainly do. Probably the rest of it is even nicer."

"There is no more of it. Just Vee Vee. Like Topsy, I just grew."

"WHAT the devil are you doing here on Venus and here in this place?"

"Growing." The blue eyes were unafraid.

Sombrely, Johnson regarded her. What was she doing here? Was she in the employ of the Venusians? If she was being planted on him, then his purpose here was suspected. He shrugged the thought aside. If his purpose here was suspected, there would be no point in planting a woman on him.

There would only be the minor matter of slipping a knife into his back.

In this city, as on all of Venus, humans died easily. No one questioned the motives of the killer.

"You look as if you were considering some very grave matter," Vee Vee said.

"Not any longer," he laughed.

"You have decided them?"

"Yes."

"Every last one of them?"

"Oh, there might be one or two matters undecided somewhere, say out on the peri-

phery of the galaxy. But we will solve them when we get to them." He waved vaguely toward the roof and the sky of space hidden behind the clouds that lay over the roof, glanced around as a man eased himself into an empty stool on his left. The man was Caldwell.

"Zlock!" Caldwell said, to the bartender.

"Make it snappy. Gotta have zlock. Finest damn drink in the solar system." Caldwell's voice was thick, his tongue heavy. Johnson's eyes went back to the girl but out of the corner of them he watched Caldwell's hand lying on the bar. The fingers were beating a quick nervous tattoo on the yellow wood.

"I haven't seen him," Caldwell's fingers beat out their tattoo. "But I think he is, or was, here."

"Um," Johnson said, his eyes on Vee Vee. "How—"

"Because that girl was asking for him," Caldwell's fingers answered. "Watch that girl!" Picking up the zlock, he lurched away from the bar.

"Your friend is not as drunk as he seems," Vee Vee said, watching Caldwell.

"My friend? Do you mean that drunk? I never saw him—"

"Lying is one of the deadly sins." Her eyes twinkled at him. Under the merriment that danced in them there was ice. Johnson felt cold.

"The reservations for ze dreaming, great one?" The headwaiter was bowing and scraping in front of him. "The great one has decided, yes?"

"The dreaming!" Vee Vee looked suddenly alert. "Of course. We must see the dreaming. Everyone wants to see the dreaming. We will go, won't we darling?" She hooked her hand into Johnson's elbow.

"Certainly," Johnson said. The decision was made on the spur of the moment. That there was danger in it, he did not doubt. But there might be something else. And *he* might be there.

"Oh. But very good. Ze great Unger, you will love him!" The headwaiter clutched the gold coins that Johnson extended, bowed himself out of sight.

"Say, I want to know more—" Johnson began. His words were drowned in a blast of trumpets. The band that had been playing went into sudden silence. Waves of perfume

began to flow into the place. The perfumes were blended, but one aroma was prominent among them, the sweet, cloying, soul-stirring perfume of the Dreamer.

In the suddenly hushed place little sounds began to appear as Venusians and humans began to shift their feet and their bodies in anticipation of what was to happen.

The trumpets flared again.

On one side of the place, a big door began to swing slowly open. From beyond that slowly opening door came music, soft, muted strains that sounded like lutes from heaven.

Vee Vee, her hand on Johnson's elbow, rose. Johnson stood up with her. He got the surprise of his life as her fingers clenched, digging into his muscles. Pain shot through his arm, paralyzing it and almost paralyzing him. He knew instantly that she was using the Karmer nerve block paralysis on him. His left hand moved with lightning speed, the tips of his fingers striking savagely against her shoulder.

She gasped, her face whitened as pain shot through her in response to the thrust of his finger tips. Her hand that had been digging into his elbow lost its grip, dropped away and hung limp at her side. Grabbing it, she began to massage it.

"You—you—" Hot anger and shock were in her voice. "You're the first man I ever knew who could break the Karmer nerve paralysis."

"And you're the first woman who ever tried it on me."

"But—"

"Shall we go watch the dreaming?" He took the arm that still hung limp at her side and tucked it into his elbow.

"If you try to use the Karmer grip on me again I'll break your arm," he said. His voice was low but there was a wealth of meaning in it.

"I won't do it again," the girl said stoutly. "I never make the same mistake twice."

"Good," Johnson said.

"The second time we break our victim's neck," Vee Vee said.

"What a sweet, charming child you—"

"I told you before, I'm not a child."

"Child vampire," Johnson said. "Let me finish my sentences before you interrupt."

She was silent. A smile, struggling to appear on her face, seemed to say she held

no malice. Her fingers tightened on Johnson's arm. He tensed, expecting the nerve block grip again. Instead with the tips of her fingers she gently patted his arm.

"There, there, darling, relax," she said. "I know a better way to get you than by using the Karmer grip."

"What way?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Eve's way," she answered.

"Um!" Surprise sounded in his grunt. "But apples don't grow on Venus."

"Eve's daughters don't use apples any more, darling. Come along."

Moving toward the open door that led to the Room of the Dreaming, Johnson saw that Caldwell had risen and was following them. Caldwell's face was writhing in apprehensive agony and he was making warning signs. Johnson ignored them. With Vee Vee's fingers lightly patting his arm, they moved into the Room of the Dreaming.

II

IT WAS a huge, semi-illuminated room, with tier on tier of circling ramps rising up from an open space at the bottom. There ought to have been a stage there at the bottom, but there wasn't. Instead there was an open space, a mat, and a head rest. Up at the top of the circling ramps the room was in darkness, a fit hiding place for ghosts or Venusian werewolves. Pillows and a thick rug covered the circling ramps.

The soul-quickenng Perfume of the Dreamer was stronger here. The throbbing of the lutes was louder. It was Venusian music the lutes were playing. Human ears found it inharmonious at first, but as they became accustomed to it, they began to detect rhythms and melodies that human minds had not known existed. The room was pleasantly cool but it had the feel of dampness. A world that was rarely without pelting rain would have the feel of dampness in its dreaming rooms.

The music playing strange harmonies in his ears, the perfume sending tingling feelings through his nose, Johnson entered the Room of the Dreamer. He suspected that other forces, unknown to him, were catching hold of his senses. He had been in dreaming rooms many times before but he had not

grown accustomed to them. He wondered if any human ever did. A touch of chill always came over him as he crossed the threshold. In entering these places, it was as if some unknown nerve center inside the human organism was touched by something, some force, some radiation, some subtlety, that quite escaped radiation. He felt the coldness now.

Vee Vee's fingers left off patting his arm.

"Do you feel it, darling?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"How would I know?"

"Please!" Her voice grew sharp. "I think Johnny Johnson ought to know."

"Johnny! How do you know my name?"

"Shouldn't I recognize one of Earth's foremost scientists, even if he is incognito on Venus?" Her voice had a teasing quality in it.

"But—"

"And who besides Johnny Johnson would recognize the Karmer nerve grip and be able to break it instantly?"

"Hell—"

"John Michael Johnson, known as Johnny to his friends, Earth's foremost expert in the field of electro-magnetic radiations within the human body!" Her words were needles of icy fact, each one jabbing deeper and deeper into him.

"And how would I make certain you were Johnny Johnson, except by seeing if you could break the Karmer nerve grip? If you could break it, then there was no doubt who you were!" Her words went on and on.

"Who are you?" His words were blasts of sound.

"Please, darling, you are making a scene. I am sure this is the last thing you really want to do."

He looked quickly around them. The Venusians and humans moving into this room seemed to be paying no attention to him. His gaze came back to her.

Again she patted his arm. "Relax, darling. Your secrets are safe with me."

A gray color came up inside his soul. "But—but—" His voice was suddenly weak.

The fingers on his arm were very gentle. "No harm will come to you. Am I not with you?"

"That's what I'm afraid of!" he snapped

at her. If he had had a choice, he might have drawn back. But with circumstances as they were—his life, Caldwell's life, possibly Vee Vee's life hung in the balance. Didn't she know that this was true? And as for Martin—But Caldwell had said that she had been asking about Martin. What connection did she have with that frantic human genius he sought here?

Johnson felt his skin crawl. He moved toward a nest of cushions on a ramp, found a Venusian was beating him to them, deftly changed to another nest, found it. Vee Vee flowed to the floor on his right, moved cushions to make him more comfortable. She moved in an easy sort of way that was all flowing movement. He sat down. Someone bumped him on the left.

"Sorry, bud. Didn't mean to bump into you." Caldwell's voice was still thick and heavy. He sprawled to the floor on Johnson's left. Under the man's coat, Johnson caught a glimpse of a slight bulge, the zit gun hidden there. His left arm pressed against his own coat, feeling his own zit gun. Operating under gas pressure, throwing a charge of gas-driven corvel, the zit guns were not only almost noiseless in operation but they knocked out a human or a Venusian in a matter of seconds.

True, the person they knocked unconscious would be all right the next day. For this reason, many people did not regard the zit guns as effective weapons, but Johnson had a fondness for them. The feel of the little weapon inside his coat sent a surge of comfort through him.

The music picked up a beat, perfume seemed to flow even more freely through the air, the lights dimmed almost to darkness, a single bright spotlight appeared in the ceiling, casting a circle of brilliant illumination on the mat and the headrest at the bottom of the room. The curtain rose.

UNGER stood in the middle of the spot of light.

Johnson felt his chest muscles contract, then relax. Vee Vee's fingers sought his arm, not to harm him but running to him for protection. He caught the flutter of her breathing. On his left, Caldwell stiffened and became a rock.

Johnson had not seen Unger appear. One

second the circle of light had been empty, the next second the Venusian, smiling with all the impassivity of a bland Buddha, was in the light. He weighed three hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce, he was clad in a long robe that would impede movement. He had appeared in the bright beam of the spotlight as if by magic.

Vee Vee's fingers dug deeper into Johnson's arm. "How—"

"Shhh. Nobody knows."

No human knew the answer to that trick. Unless perhaps Martin—

Unger bowed. A little ripple of something that was not quite sound passed through the audience. Unger bowed again. He stretched himself flat on the mat, adjusted the rest to support his head, and apparently went to sleep. Johnson saw the Dreamer's eyes close, watched the chest take on the even, regular rhythm of sleep.

The music changed, a slow dreamy tempo crept into it. Vee Vee's fingers dug at Johnson's arm as if they were trying to dig under his hide for protection. She was shivering. He reached for her hand, patted it. She drew closer to him.

A few minutes earlier, she had been a very certain young woman, able to take care of herself, and handle anyone around her. Now she was suddenly uncertain, suddenly scared. In the Room of the Dreaming, she had suddenly become a frightened child looking for protection.

"Haven't you ever seen this before?" he whispered.

"N—o." She shivered again. "Oh, Johnny . . ."

Under the circle of light pouring down from the ceiling, the Dreamer lay motionless. Johnson found himself with the tendency to hold his breath. He was waiting, waiting, waiting—for what? The whole situation was senseless, silly, but under its apparent lack of coherence, he sensed a pattern. Perhaps the path to the far-off stars passed this way, through such scented and musical and impossible places as these Rooms of the Dreamers. Certainly Martin thought so. And Johnson himself was not prepared to disagree.

Around him, he saw that the Venusians were already going . . . going . . . going . . . Some of them were already gone. This was

an old experience to them. They went rapidly. Humans went more slowly.

The Venusian watchers had relaxed. They looked as if they were asleep, perhaps in a hypnotic trance, lulled into this state by the music and the perfume, and by something else. It was this something else that sent Johnson's thoughts pounding. The Venusians were like opium smokers. But he was not smoking opium. He was not in a hypnotic trance. He was wide awake and very much alert. He was . . .

watching a space ship float in an endless void.

As Unger had come into the spotlight, so the space ship had come into his vision, out of nowhere, out of nothingness. The room, the Dreamer, the sound of the music, the sweetness of the perfume, Vee Vee and Caldwell were gone. They were no longer in his reality. They were not in the range of his vision. It was as if they did not exist. Yet he knew they did exist, the memory of them, and of other things, was out on the periphery of his universe, perhaps of *the* universe.

All he saw was the space ship.

It was a wonderful thing, perhaps the most beautiful sight he had seen in his life. At the sight of it, a deep glow sprang inside of him.

Back when he had been a kid he had dreamed of flight to the far-off stars. He had made models of space ships. In a way, they had shaped his destiny, had made him what he was. They had brought him where he was this night, to the Dream Room of a Venusian tavern.

The vision of the space ship floating in the void entranced and thrilled him. Something told him that this was real; that here and now he was making contact with a vision that belonged to time.

He started to his feet. Fingers gripped his arm.

"Please, darling. You startled me. Don't move." Vee Vee's voice. Who was Vee Vee?

The fingers dug into his arm. Pain came up in him. The space ship vanished. He looked with startled eyes at Vee Vee, at the Dream Room, at Unger, dreaming on the mat under the spot.

"You . . . you startled me," Vee Vee whispered. She released the grip on his arm.

"But, didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

"The space ship!"

"No. No." She seemed startled and a little terrified and half asleep. "I . . . I was watching something else. When you moved I broke contact with my dream."

"Your dream?"

He asked a question but she did not answer it. "Sit down, darling, and look at your damned space ship." Her voice was a taut whisper of sound in the darkened room. Johnson settled down. A glance to his left told him that Caldwell was still sitting like a chunk of stone . . . The Venusians were quiet. The music had shifted. A slow languorous beat of hidden drums filled the room. There was another sound present, a high-speed whirring. It was, somehow, a familiar sound, but Johnson had not heard it before in this place.

He thought about the space ship he had seen.

The vision would not come.

He shook his head and tried again.

Beside him, Vee Vee was silent, her face ecstatic, like the face of a woman in love.

He tried again for the space ship.

It would not come.

Anger came up instead.

Somehow he had the impression that the whirring sound which kept intruding into his consciousness was stopping the vision.

So far as he could tell, he was the only one present who was not dreaming, who was not in a state of trance.

His gaze went to Unger, the Dreamer . . .

Cold flowed over him.

Unger was slowly rising from the mat.

The bland face and the body in the robe were slowly floating upward!

III

AN INVISIBLE force seemed to twitch at Johnson's skin, nipping it here and there with a multitude of tiny pinches, like invisible fleas biting him.

"This is it!" a voice whispered in his mind. "This is what you came to Venus to see. This . . . this . . ." The first voice went into silence. Another voice took its place.

"This is another damned vision!" the

second voice said. "This . . . this is something that is not real, that is not possible! No Venusian Dreamer, and no one else, can levitate, can defy the laws of gravity, can float upward toward the ceiling. Your damned eyes are tricking you!"

"We are not tricking you!" the eyes hotly insisted. "It is happening. We are seeing it. We are reporting accurately to you. That Venusian Buddha is levitating. We, your eyes, do not lie to you!"

"You lied about the space ship!" the second voice said.

"We did not lie about the space ship!" the eyes insisted. "When our master saw that ship we were out of focus, we were not reporting. Some other sense, some other organ, may have lied, but we did not."

"I—" Johnson whispered.

"I am your skin," another voice whispered. "I am covered with sweat."

"We are your adrenals. We are pouring forth adrenalin."

"I am your pancreas. I am gearing you for action."

"I am your thyroid. I . . ."

A multitude of tiny voices seemed to whisper through him. It was as if the parts of his body had suddenly found voices and were reporting to him what they were doing. These were voices out of his training days when he had learned the names of these functions and how to use them.

"Be quiet!" he said roughly.

The little voices seemed to blend into a single chorus. "Action, Master! Do something."

"Quiet!" Johnson ordered.

"But hurry. We are excited."

"There is a time to be excited and a time to hurry. In this situation, if action is taken before the time for it—if that time ever comes—we can all die."

"Die?" the chorus quavered.

"Yes," Johnson said. "Now be quiet. When the time goes we will all go together."

The chorus went into muted silence. But just under the threshold the little voices were a multitude of tiny fretful pressures.

"I hear a whirring sound," his ears reported.

"Please!" Johnson said.

In the front of the room Unger floated ten feet above the floor.

"Master, we are not lying!" his eyes repeated.

"I sweat . . ." his skin began.

"Watch Unger!" Johnson said.

The Dreamer floated. If wires suspended him, Johnson could not see them. If any known force lifted him, Johnson could not detect that force. All he could say for certain was that Unger floated.

"Yaaaah!" The silence of a room was broken by the enraged scream of a Venusian being jarred out of his dream.

"Damn it!" A human voice said.

A wave as sharp as the tip of a sword swept through the room.

Unger fell.

He was ten feet high when he started to fall. With a bone-breaking, body-jarring thud, the Dreamer fell. Hard.

There was a split second of startled silence in the Dreaming Room. The silence went. Voices came.

"Who did that?"

"What happened?"

"That human hidden there did it! He broke the Dreaming!" Anger marked the voices. Although the language was Venusian, Johnson got most of the meaning. His hand dived under his coat for the gun holstered there. At his left, Caldwell was muttering thickly. "What—what happened? I was back in the lab on Earth—" Caldwell's voice held a plaintive note, as if some pleasant dream had been interrupted.

On Johnson's right, Vee Vee seemed to flow to life. Her arms came up around his neck. He was instantly prepared for anything. Her lips came hungrily against his lips, pressed very hard, then gently drew away.

"What—" he gasped.

"I had to do it now, darling," she answered. "There may not be a later."

Johnson had no time to ask her what she meant. Somewhere in the back of the room a human screamed. He jerked around. Back there a knot of Venusians were attacking a man.

"It's Martin!" Caldwell shouted. "He *is* here!"

In Johnson's hand as he came to his feet the zit gun throbbed. He fired blindly at the mass of Venusians. Caldwell was firing too. The soft throb of the guns was not

audible above the uproar from the crowd. Struck by the gas-driven corvel charges, Venusians were falling. But there seemed to be an endless number of them.

"Vee Vee?" Johnson suddenly realized that she had disappeared. She had slid out of his sight.

"Vee Vee!" Johnson's voice became a shout.

"To hell with the woman!" Caldwell grunted. "Martin's the important one."

Zit, zit, zit, Caldwell moved toward the rear, shooting as he went. Johnson followed.

A VOICE boomed through the room, in Venusian. "Let movement stop!"

At the sound of that voice the Venusians stopped all motion.

Again the voice boomed through the room.

"Bring the human to me."

The voice came from Unger.

The knot of Venusians around the human came back to life. A knife flashed.

"Bring him to me unharmed!" Unger boomed.

The knife went hastily out of sight. The knot of Venusians came untangled. They carried a struggling human down the ramps toward the bottom of the pit.

"It's Martin!" Caldwell shouted. "Let's knock these Venusians over, grab him, and break for the door."

"Hold it," Johnson said. "It may not be that easy. We will go with them to Unger."

Carrying Martin to the bottom of the pit, the Venusians set him on his feet. Martin was tall, dark-haired, a slender length of living, nervous whipcord. His hair was tousled, his clothing torn. As Martin came to his feet, Johnson saw that blood was running down one side of his face.

Unger was standing erect. His 300 pounds radiated anger, rage, hate.

"Dreamer, he had a thing which the humans call a camera or a recorder." The speaker, an elderly Venusian, was outraged. He jerked a knife from its scabbard. "Dreamer, allow me the privilege of slitting his throat!" He held the knife high, awaiting only the signal to plunge it into Martin's neck.

A fierce throb of anger seemed to flow through the Room of the Dreaming.

"All things in their time," Unger said. "Do you hold your knife for now."

The fingers of the Venusian trembled as he slipped the knife back into its scabbard.

"Dreamer, I obey. But remember, when the time comes, the privilege is mine. I spoke first!" Hot anger sounded in the Venusian's voice.

"It will be remembered, Tildaro," Unger said. He lifted his gaze. "Bring me this camera, this thing that the human was using."

A Venusian carried the camera down the steps and handed it to Unger. While the Venusians had never denied humans entry to the dreaming rooms, any kind of a camera or other recording device had always been strictly forbidden. Neither argument, persuasion nor offers of payment had ever moved a Dreamer to permit the recording of a dream performance. Under his breath, Johnson cursed. The recorder was evidence that could not be denied. "The fool!" Johnson cursed.

Unger took the device and examined it.

"Hmmm." His eyes sought Martin. "This is not only a camera, it is a very complex and compact recording device designed to make a permanent record of the sights, sounds, and many of the other vibratory frequencies present in this room."

"Well—" Martin said.

"There is no point in attempting to deny it. The object speaks for itself. Why did you bring this recording device into the Room of the Dreaming?" Unger's words were hard and cold.

"No excuse!" Martin's words were hot. "Just a single question: Why are they forbidden in these rooms?"

"Why?" Unger's voice suddenly lost its certainty.

Martin's voice continued. "Why have you kept this information from us humans? Is it because these Dreaming Rooms, and the act of dreaming as practiced by you Venusians, is nothing but a hypnotic device, a trick used to cheat fools of their money?"

"It—"

"Fraud!" Martin shouted. The word seemed to roar through the room.

Unger lost his poise. The Venusian seemed to writhe, to squirm, to twist as if some unseen and invisible force was tortur-

ing him.

Johnson moved forward. Caldwell went with them. Martin saw them for the first time.

"Johnny! Caldwell! Where did you come from?"

Johnson's eyes were centered on Unger. The zit gun in his hand was poised and aimed at the eyes of the Venusian.

"If anyone makes a move toward us, the charge in this gun will go into your eyes," Johnson said. "I suppose you know that under such circumstances the charge from a zit gun will kill."

Unger stopped his squirming. He seemed suddenly to realize that other humans were present. His round, impassive face turned toward Johnson.

"Ah, yes, you," he said.

"Call off your dogs," Johnson said. "Tell these people to permit us to leave."

"But—"

"You look at death, Dreamer!"

"I know that. Death is not important. Have you considered that these dogs are really wolves who will tear you to pieces at my nod?" Unger's shifting gaze indicated the other Venusians in the room. Out of the corners of his eyes Johnson saw that Taldaro had drawn his knife again. Others were moving like jungle cats getting ready to pounce.

"True, you can have your wolves kill us," Johnson said. "But our deaths will follow yours, not precede it."

His voice was clear and firm. If there was fear in him it was out of sight. He did not know how much most of the Venusians were understanding of what he was saying but one thing they certainly understood—the zit gun in his hand.

"We are going out of here," Johnson said. "You are going with us as a hostage. Our lives for your life."

Unger lifted his hand. "One minute, if you please. There are questions I want to ask. Who is this man?" He gestured toward Martin.

"A very renowned human scientist."

"Ah, and what is he doing on Venus?"

"Don't tell him!" Caldwell spoke sharply.

"It's none of his business."

"It might be some of my business if I knew," Unger said.

Warning voices were urging Johnson away from this place, screaming at him to get away while he had the chance. Inside of him, tiny voices were shouting warnings, his skin was reporting sweat again, his brain was reporting the pressure of an emotional overload. Inside of him was still another voice insisting that here he dealt with illusion and hallucination, shouting at him, "You saw a space ship where no space ship could exist! In this place how can you determine reality?"

THE expression on the face of the Venusian was very strange but it was some kind of a smile. Seeing it, Johnson hesitated, spoke impulsively. "We three are a group of human scientists who have come to Venus to . . ." he hesitated.

"Damn it, Johnny!" Caldwell gritted.

"Tell him, Johnny," Martin spoke. "There may be more involved in telling him than we know. The recordings will tell."

"We came here to investigate the dreaming," Johnson spoke.

"Ah," Unger said. Shades of feelings played across his face. "You are the three humans who came asking about the dreaming! I have heard of you."

"We asked for information, knowledge, understanding," Johnson's voice got hard again. "We sought these things. What did we get?"

"You asked for bread and we dreamers gave you a stone," Unger spoke.

"What?" Johnson gasped. The shift to a religious framework startled him. He had not thought that a Venusian understood such things.

"Perhaps the stone we gave you was more palatable than the bread you asked for," Unger continued.

"But—"

"However, when your request was denied, you did not stop seeking?" Unger asked.

"Of course not! We don't belong to a race that stops seeking. We sought other ways to get the information."

"Is the information important to you?"

"Yes."

"What luck did you have with the other ways?"

Johnson shook his head. Bitterness came up in him. "None. The Dreaming Rooms

were everywhere, the Dreamers were a group apart. The Dreamers would not talk. No other Venusian ever admitted knowing anything."

"And so—"

"One of us, the most impetuous and perhaps the most brilliant of us, became impatient." Imperceptibly Johnson nodded toward Martin. "We knew there was danger in the Dreaming Rooms. He ignored that danger. He slipped away from us. I think perhaps he hid from us to protect us from the danger he intended to face. We discovered that possibly he had come here tonight. We did not know for sure that he was here until a Venusian discovered the recorder in operation."

Martin stepped forward and took the recorder from Unger's hands. The Venusian released it without reluctance.

"So you came here tonight to find and help a friend?" Unger said.

"Yes. He is impetuous and impatient. He wants answers."

"And I've got 'em right here." Martin clutched the recorder in a tighter grip. "Let's get out of this joint. I want to see what these wires have on them. Come on, Johnny. You cover that Dreamer and we will take him with us—"

"One instant more," Unger spoke. "What was the vision that you saw?" He addressed Johnson.

"A—"

"Eeeeeeech!" A woman's scream ripped through the room. Martin and Caldwell both turned. Johnson did not move. He kept his eyes rigidly fixed on Unger. The Venusian stood in the bright glare from the spot, glanced toward the source of the scream.

"Bring the human forward unharmed," Unger spoke.

Fighting, scratching, clawing, doing everything but spit and she would have done that if she had had the chance, Vee Vee was dragged forward. Johnson still did not move. Neither his gaze nor the focus of his zit gun ever left Unger's face. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Martin leap forward.

"Vee Vee!" Martin screamed. "What in the devil are you doing here? What the hell are you doing on Venus?"

Out of the corners of his eyes, Johnson

saw Vee Vee flow into Martin's arms. "Hank, Hank Darling, I came by the last rocket. I've been looking everywhere for you." Her arms were around Martin's neck and she was kissing him wildly. "I learned you might be here and I came here looking for you. When they caught you, I tried to escape and go for help. I couldn't get out. They caught me too, Hank." Again she kissed him.

The word, "Hank," rang through Johnson's mind like a bell. Very few people knew Martin's nickname. He was very sensitive about this name, it was his most carefully guarded secret, known only to friends intimate enough not to use it. If Vee Vee knew Martin's carefully guarded name.

"Oh, hell!" Something inside Johnson said. "Damn!"

He glanced at the two, to make certain of what he was seeing out of the corners of his eyes. The instant after he shifted his gaze he knew it was not the thing to do. He swung quickly back to look at Unger.

The circle of light was empty.

Unger had vanished.

In the silence, Johnson could hear Venusian feet drawing closer, the soft rustle of knives being pulled from scabbards.

IV

JOHNSON stood without moving and stared at the empty circle of light.

His eyes insisted. "He is not there. We looked away for a moment and when we looked back he was gone."

The corners of his eyes said, "We caught a glimpse of something . . ."

"What was it you glimpsed?"

"We . . . we are not certain . . . we think . . ."

The human could not wait to get the message from the corners of his eyes. Steps were driving forward. He whirled in time to see Taldero lunging at him. A naked knife glittered in the Venusian's uplifted hand. Taldero's face was a gleaming mask of triumph. The Venusian was already relishing the good feeling he would get from sinking his knife up to the hilt in this human's throat. Men were interlopers on Venus, space creatures to be destroyed, vermin that no honest Venusian could accept.

Johnson dropped the zit gun. There was no time to use it. In this moment it was only in his way. One hand caught the uplifted arm. His body met Taldero's body. He was rocked backward by the fury of that charge. He caught himself. The other hand sought Taldero's body. The Venusian gasped with pain as the Karmer nerve block was forced home. He shuddered and went limp. The knife fell from his fingers. Johnson shoved him backward against another Venusian. From the floor he snatched the gun and the knife.

He could hear Caldwell's gun spitting. A semi-circle of Venusians were pressing toward the three humans. Caldwell was holding them back. Martin, unarmed, was clutching the recorder. Vee Vee stood in front of him like some amazon preparing to do battle for her mate.

"Vee Vee! Catch!" She turned startled eyes toward Johnson in time to snatch the gun he threw to her.

"But what will you do—"

"I've still got Taldero's knife. Back up against the back wall and try to hold them at bay. I think I know something."

Johnson dived through the spotlight. The wall behind the light was decorated with a mural, a spot on Venus where the sun was breaking through clouds and illumining a vast, rain-swept valley. On Venus, where they saw the sun but rarely, the sight of Sol was considered about the same as a glimpse of heaven. He felt along the mural. The corners of his eyes insisted, "He went this way." His searching fingers found a spot, pushed against it. A section of the wall slid soundlessly away.

Sitting in a soft chair in the hidden room revealed there, Unger looked calmly at him.

"You saw me go?" Unger said. "You are very, very seeing. No Venusian and up until now no human has ever seen an adept move. We have a rule about it . . ."

"A part of my eyes saw you move and recorded the impression," Johnson stepped into the room. In his hand, the knife blade glittered. "Life ticks away very rapidly here tonight." He gestured outward where the screams of the Venusians mingled with the throb of the guns. "Call off your wolves or life will stop ticking for you."

Unger seemed utterly unperturbed by the

sight of the knife or the man behind it. "They are not my wolves," he said. "I do not know that I can call them off but perhaps I can hold them at bay for a while." He rose with the easy grace of an athlete and moved to the opening.

Out there three humans were backing against the wall. Johnson did not look at them. This time he would not take his eyes off Unger.

"Peace!" The Dreamer's voice was practically a roar.

The Venusians pressing close against the three humans hesitated. In the distance a voice screamed, "I saw you—"

"Inside here, you humans," Unger spoke quickly.

Vee Vee, Martin, and Caldwell slid through the opening. Unger slammed the door, dropped a bar across it. Looking at him, Johnson saw that the Venusian was sweating.

The humans were panting. Vee Vee looked at Johnson. Her eyes glowed. "Johnny! You did it!" Johnson looked away.

Martin stared around the room. "So this is the trick!" He spat out the words. "They distract your attention, then they jump into this hole. It's just a matter of moving very rapidly. Probably they spend years learning it and think they have something very important when they master it." Bitter disappointment sounded in Martin's voice. He seemed to have forgotten the death they had so narrowly missed outside. He lifted the recorder as if he intended to smash it on the floor.

Unger caught it, took it from the human. "I thought you wanted to see what went on inside the Room of the Dreaming."

"I did, but I didn't think it was fraud. I sensed that something important was here." Martin's voice was the voice of a man who has lost a dream.

"Why don't you look at the recording?"

"To hell with the recording. It will only show more fraud."

"But—"

"I say to hell with it too!" Caldwell interrupted. "Our necks come first. Let's get out of here, Johnny—"

"Just a moment," Johnson said. Sweat was now visible on Unger's face, glistening in heavy yellow drops.

"Why don't you see the recording?"

Unger urged. From the angle in which his head was held, Johnson had the impression the Dreamer was listening. The human listened too. He could hear no sound unless it was a thin mumble of voices beyond the barred door.

"The recorder is also a projector on the sound and visual tracks, is it not?" Unger asked.

"Yes," Martin's voice was sullen.

"Then shall we take a few minutes and see what the recorder caught in the Room of the Dreaming?" Without waiting for an answer he snapped the switches that rewound the wires and began to set up the recorder to function as a projector. "We will project the visual part against the wall there and listen to the sound. The other radiations you have caught will need extensive laboratory equipment to interpret."

"You seem to know a lot about this!" Martin challenged.

"Do I? Ah . . ." Watching him handle the recorder Johnson had the impression that the Venusian had never seen one of these instruments but was swiftly grasping the meaning of the various dials and switches as he came to them. If this was true, it was a marvelous mental feat. Wonder rose in Johnson. But his eyes never left Unger and his hand did not relax its grip on Taldero's knife.

"Watch," Unger said.

A JET of light from the self-contained unit sprang out through the lens, flashing against the wall. Unger gestured toward it. "Watch," he repeated.

"I'm watching you," Johnson said.

"Suspicious?"

"Don't I have a right to be?"

The question went unanswered. Music from the sound track throbbed in the small room. The scene on the wall revealed Unger stretched flat on the mat.

"Damned fraud!" Martin muttered.

Vee Vee moved close to Johnson. Her whisper was very soft. "I wonder if we will see the dreams again?"

"I do not know. I am watching the Dreamer."

"Yes. I know." She moved closer still. Her voice was even softer. "Darling."

"Shut up!"

She shrank away from him. He was aware that her eyes were on him. Suddenly she laughed, softly. "Oh, good! You're jealous."

Had she read his mind? "I am not jealous. Shut up. This is no time for talk."

In spite of what he said she moved closer. Under his breath he swore at her.

In the distance he seemed to catch the mutter of shouted voices. "I tell you I saw him!" one voice screamed.

"Look!" Wild excitement was in Martin's tone. "Look! He *is* floating."

Johnson felt his heart beat pick up.

The projected scene revealed that Unger was actually floating.

"If the recorder caught it like that it actually happened that way!" Martin screamed. "You can't hypnotize a recorder."

But was it real? Was the Dreamer really floating? Desperately Johnson wanted to see with all his eyes.

"We will watch Unger for you," the corners of his eyes whispered.

Johnson dared to look at the projected picture. There was no mistaking the evidence. The Dreamer was floating. No wires lifted him. The recorder would have caught wires.

"This floating is no fraud," Unger said softly. "We Dreamers know and manipulate and use forces—"

"Anti-gravity!" Martin screamed. "With anti-gravity comes ships to the stars!"

"We Dreamers know certain forces, certain energy states, which we manipulate—"
Crash!

The door went down. The bar was tore from its sockets by the sudden pressure applied against it. Through the opening a knife came, crashed against the wall. Then another and another.

In Vee Vee's and Caldwell's hands the zit guns throbbed. Venusians stumbled through the doorway.

"This way," Unger said, moving toward the farther wall.

Martin snatched the recorder from the table and turned the light beam on a Venusian trying to get through the door. He dodged backward. From the Room of the Dreaming a babble of angry voices arose.

"This way," Unger repeated. The door

was open in the farther wall. The humans dived through it. Unger closed it and followed them.

They found themselves in darkness. Martin turned the recorder on it. The light from it revealed a tunnel. Unger moved forward. "Follow, please."

"These Dreamers do know something," Martin was babbling to Johnson. "They have latched on to vital secrets of nature. I don't know what else they've got but that secret of floating is. . . ."

"There are many secrets," Unger said as he moved ahead of them. "In the last analysis perhaps there is only one secret, one energy, but this energy takes many forms."

"How do you do this dreaming?" Martin questioned.

"It is a very complex process," Unger answered. "The music and the perfume are part of it. But we, the Dreamers, are the heart and the core and the soul of it. What you call hypnosis is involved in part. We Dreamers reach the minds of our audience. We bring up to the level of awareness the most cherished dream of those who are in rapport with us. We Dreamers see, feel, and share in the dreaming of our audience. To some extent we direct their dreaming. They have no comprehension of what is involved. To them the Dreaming is a sacred thing. The Dreamers are minor gods."

"But how do you float?" Martin repeated.

"We take the force which you call gravity. It is an energy state. We tap this energy to reach the minds of our audience, to control and to come into rapport with them." The Venusian's breath was coming in gasps.

"Yes. Go on." Martin was the hound on the scent of prey, the eager scientist following the clue no matter where it lead, knowing there was an answer and determined to have that answer no matter the cost.

Unger stopped. A door was ahead. He fumbled with a catch. The door swung open.

Rain and the darkness of the night swept through the opening. In the far distance lightning walked across the sky. Outside was the streets of the city.

"Seek safety!" Unger's voice was hoarse. "It will perhaps be better if you

leave Venus. I warn you fairly, my people are wolves. They hold the dreaming sacred. Sometimes they hold the Dreamers sacred. But if they think you have stolen the secrets of the dreaming—Well, it would be better for you for wolves to tear you to pieces than it would be for my people to catch you." He leaned against the open door.

"But the secret of the floating?" Martin insisted.

"You have it on your recorder." Unger answered. "It is a matter of frequency, of vibration and interwoven vibration. From the information on your recorder, you can develop the equations you will need. Go."

"Good!" Martin's voice was a shout of exultation rising in the dark night.

"My people will soon be searching the streets. Go."

Martin and Caldwell went quickly through the opening. Johnson hesitated. "Unger . . . Dreamer . . ." He sought for words. "You . . . you're a great guy."

The Venusian's hand came to his arm. Vee Vee stood very close, watching, waiting, though Martin had already gone.

"Thank you, my friend," Unger whispered. "I accept your words and the meaning that is behind them."

"I . . ." Johnson's voice choked into silence. Here was a great Venusian and he knew it, a Dreamer whose dream went beyond race, beyond space, perhaps beyond time.

"Come with us," Johnson said. "Come to Earth with us."

"No." Unger's voice was almost a sob. "I may not leave this planet."

"Why not? We will protect you. On Earth there will be great honor for you."

"There is honor here for me among the Dreamers. You do not know it, my friend, but all the Dreamers of Venus are with me now in this moment while my life drains away. They give me honor. More than I deserve."

Horror flooded through Johnson. "While your life drains away? I don't understand."

Unger leaned forward. "Look. . ."

FROM his back the hilt of a knife protruded. "One of the knives found a target."

"The hopeless fools! Come. We will help you."

"No human and no Venusian may help me now. The Dreamers are with me. My life is going. Believe me, my friend, I know." The Venusian straightened up and coughed blood.

"The fools were throwing at me and they hit you accidentally."

"It was no accident," Unger said. "And the knife was aimed at me."

"At you? Why? But the Dreamers are sacred."

"Not if they break the rules. And I broke one of them. Some Venusian saw me leave the spot of light, the trick that you saw."

"But it was only a trick."

"As I did it tonight it was a trick," Unger whispered. "But as the rules go, it is no more a trick than the floating. We go into the light by a path that none may see."

"Then you deliberately stepped out of the spot of light—"

"Yes, my friend."

"In heaven's name, why?" One mystery had been solved only to open a greater one.

"Perhaps because I wanted *you* to see me go, and follow me. Some Venusian saw me go, the one that screamed, 'I saw him!' It was a chance I took. The rules of the Dreamers say that if any watcher sees one come or go, his life is forfeit."

"You wanted me to see you go. Unger, why?"

"Because I saw your vision, your dream." Unger's voice was very weak. "Tell me, my friend, was not your dream that of a space ship flying through far-off voids, the pathway to the stars?"

"Yes. Yes. That was what I saw. But . . ."

"That is my dream too." Unger gasped. "It is a dream which you humans can bring to fruition. But it is not only a dream, it is a prophecy. Some day you humans will sail such a ship to the far-off stars. Here, tonight a Dreamer helped that prophecy to fulfillment. When that ship sails to the stars, Venusians will sail with you because of what a Venusian did here tonight. Two dreams met tonight and will meet again in the far-off stars."

"Lord!" Johnson whispered. Here was magic beyond comprehension. But if it was

magic now, in one time to come it would be the laws of science, of energy, of space, and of time, when the records of the recorder had been translated.

"Go now," the Venusian whispered. Johnson could have stayed, he would have lifted the 300 pound bulk in his arms. Unger forbade it. "And one other thing."

"What other thing?"

"The dream of the woman. I saw that, too."

Johnson suddenly realized that while Martin and Caldwell had vanished into the night, Vee Vee was still with him.

"What about my dream?" she spoke.

"Your dream was of the man with you."

Unger whispered. "I saw it. I understood it. It was another factor in the web of dreams I was weaving."

"She was dreaming of me!" Johnson said. "But she is in love with Martin."

"Idiot!" Her voice had a cutting edge.

"Of course I love him. He's my brother. I wanted to come with him here but he wouldn't let me. It was from him that I learned so much about you, including how to break the Karmer grip, from his talk before he left Earth, from his letters to me."

"Your dream was of a space ship to the far-off stars. Her dream was of love, and of you." Unger sighed.

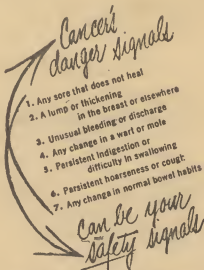
"I can dream of space ships too," Vee Vee spoke. "I can do more than dream of them. I can fly there with them."

"Good," Unger whispered as if now all things were complete. "That is all that is needed. Go now. Go!"

His voice drove them.

Hand in hand they ran through the rainy night.

Ahead of them, in some far-off sky, like a vision seen in a dream, a space ship floated.



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THE RHIZOID KILL

By JACK BRADLEY

Rhizoids—fabulous gems that harnessed every brilliant sun of the Galaxy—these were the kill-stones that sent space-rat Mallard racing for the forbidden swamp belt of Mercury . . . into a lurid land that beckoned the get-rich-quick riffraff.

THE first half mile into the swamp hadn't been so bad, but now Mallard began to feel really afraid. There were things in here that no spaceman had ever seen and against some of them the small blaster on his hip would be about as effective as a popgun.

A little way ahead of him, he could dimly see the naked body of the Mercurian swamp girl and he swore enviously at the way she

slipped through the dense fern growth, her webbed feet gripping the mud firmly. Once she held up her hand warningly and he slipped down behind a fallen tree fern to let a huge plant slug glide past. The thing was nearly forty feet in length and it could move with the speed of an express train.

When it was gone, he got up and followed the swamp girl again. He hugged the helmet to him closer and grinned at the

feel of the strange metal in his hands. That helmet was his one last chance for all the things he had ever wanted and he would hold on to it as long as he had life left. With that helmet he could be free of Bill Olger and D'ulio, the Martian, and go back to Earth with more wealth than a space rat like himself had ever brought back. It was now, he reflected, one month from the night he had met them, back in Venusport . . .

Mallard was sitting at a table in the Green Star the night they came in. Sitting there, drinking Sre, the raw native wine, and wondering if he could afford another glass of the stuff. He was surrounded by the riff-raff of the spaceways and his nerves were raw from a week-long bout with the Sre.

The two men came in, looked the dingy place over for a moment, then made directly for his table. They were both big men, the Earth man a red-haired giant with the cold eyes and the hard, ruthless face of the space rat. Mallard had come to know plenty of men like him since he had been kicked out of the Patrol. Hard, bitter men, shrewd and utterly conscienceless. The Martian beside him he hardly noticed. His red, skeleton-like face was the typical Martian mask and Mallard wasted no time trying to form an estimate of him. No Earth man ever would know what a Martian was like until he'd lived beside him for years—sometimes not even then. And, anyway, Mallard wasn't too interested in either of them. Not even when they came over and sat at his table.

"I'm Bill Olger," the Earth man began without preliminaries. "This is my friend, D'ulio, one of the smartest scientists Mars has ever produced. We know about you. You're George Mallard, owner of the Space Lark."

"If you're getting ready to make a touch you can save your breath," Mallard said sourly. "I haven't got a hundred credits to my name."

"We're not getting ready to make a touch, Mallard," Olger said. "We're getting ready to let you in on the chance of a lifetime. Now, do you want to let us buy you a drink of something decent while we tell you about it, or would you rather keep on sitting here alone drinking this slop?"

Mallard looked from his hard face to the spidery red mask of the Martian, then

shrugged his shoulders and pushed out his empty glass. Olger beckoned to the Venusian waiter and presently Mallard was sipping a glass of pale green brandy that soothed his raw nerves like the almost forgotten touch of an Earth woman's hands. Bill Olger yanked his chair closer and bent his head over the table.

"Look, Mallard, I'm not going to beat around the bush with you. I've kept pretty close tabs on you since you were kicked out of the Patrol and I know you're at the end of your rope. You've been picked up twice by the Patrol, on suspicion of piracy and, both times, you got away by the skin of your teeth. So our proposition is made to order for you, if you've got as much nerve as I think you have. The proposition is rhizoids."

Mallard whistled softly. Rhizoids! Those incredible gems brought back from the fringes of the impenetrable swamp belt of Mercury. Gems that grew, layer upon layer, like a pearl growing within an oyster, in the heart of a fungus shrub that looked like a dead, white stump. There were less than a dozen of those gems in all the Galaxy and they were worth upwards of a hundred thousand credits each.

Mallard had seen one only once and that had been at a distance. It was worn by a Martian desert queen and he had never forgotten the exquisite beauty of the thing. Even yards away he could see the sultry fires imprisoned in that incredible stone and it made every other jewel he had ever seen look like a piece of cheap cut glass.

"Sounds very nice, Olger," he said slowly. "There's just one little catch to it. The fungus stumps where those things grow are loaded with spores and those spores are the deadliest things in all the System. A friend of mine, First Mate on the Jupiter run, went on an expedition to bring back some of those rhizoids a few years back and he told me what it was like.

"They wear glassite suits while they're hacking the stumps apart to get at the rhizoids. The instant one of those stumps is touched it sends out a fine cloud of spores and when those spores settle down on a glassite suit it looks like the man was covered by hoar frost. They throw the suits away when they leave the scene.

"One of the men, this mate said, hap-

pened to step on a piece of one of those stumps, after he'd gotten out of his glassite suit. I got kind of sick listening to the mate tell about what happened then. Ever see an Earth wasp sting another insect and then lay its eggs in that insect's body, Olger? Well, it was like that. The man was paralyzed the minute the spores settled on him and he started screaming. A couple of minutes and the spores had paralyzed his vocal chords and after that he stopped screaming. He—well, he just kept screaming with his eyes, the mate said. They put a blaster to the poor devil's head before they left.

"That's what those spores are like, Olger, and I don't want any part of them, thanks. I don't mind taking a chance on dying from a ray gun but those rhizoids are only worth a hundred thousand credits apiece and I'd want a hundred million before I'd take a chance on dying like that."

"And what if we could show you a chance to make your hundred million?" Bill Olger asked softly.

Mallard's fingers tightened around his glass. "I'm listening."

"You see," Olger began slowly, "the trouble up to now has been that no one could get those stones out of the fungus stumps unless he was protected by a cumbersome glassite suit and the swamp belt is too dense to bring those suits into. That meant they could only pick up a few they found growing around the rim of the belt. There are rumors that the natives have found a way to handle the spores but they regard the fungus as sacred and won't help.

"But, a couple of years back the Galactic Colonization Board finally managed to get one of the plants back to Earth. It isn't generally known but they really did it. They used a low powered force field and finally worked it into a glassite cage. They kept it quiet because they lost three of their men getting the thing caged.

"When they got the fungus stump back to Earth they began to experiment with it. They started coating white rats with different chemicals and coverings, or injecting different drugs in them, and then sending them into the cage with the thing. They used up an awful lot of white rats, Mallard."

George Mallard shuddered. "I can believe that."

"The main thing, though, the thing that matters to us, is that they put D'ulio, here, in charge of the experiments. And D'ulio had ideas of his own. He was just out of the Martian University and he just couldn't see any point in working for Terrans for the rest of his life for a small salary.

"The second week D'ulio worked on the fungus stump he discovered that the spores could be killed as fast as they were released by a plain, ordinary Overton ray. You remember the old Overton ray gun that was used in the war against the Martian desert tribes? The gun was originally meant to be rigged up on a ship but D'ulio made a smaller model that could be carried by two men and it worked on the spores as well as a big gun.

"As soon as D'ulio was sure of his findings he opened the fungus stump, took out the rhizoid from it, then 'accidentally' burned the stump to a crip. He reported that there was no rhizoid inside it. Sometimes they don't have, you know, just as lots of pearls don't happen to be there when you open the oyster. He was fired for his carelessness. As soon as it was safe he contacted me. He knew I had ways of getting rid of the rhizoid that he didn't have. So, here we are. D'ulio has the equipment we need. We have the money to finance the expedition—and you have the ship. What do you say, Mallard?"

"It would take the best part of fifty thousand credits to get the Space Lark ready for a trip like that," Mallard said doubtfully.

"And I've got twice that, right here in my pocket, chum." Bill Olger reached into his pocket and handed something to Mallard under cover of the table. Something that was smooth and round and hard. Mallard held it below the level of the table top and looked. Then he drew in his breath as sharply as if he had been hit in the stomach.

At first glance, the thing looked like a large and very perfect Terran fire opal. But no opal ever gleamed with the unbelievably sultry fires that lived in this stone. It looked as though every sun of the Galaxy were imprisoned within its depths. George Mallard looked at the rhizoid in his hand for a moment longer, then turned

to Bill Olger. When he spoke, his voice was shaky.

"We can be ready to blast off in forty-eight hours."

THE Swamp Belt of Mercury! Mallard looked at the almost impenetrable growth of tangled fern trees and undergrowth and swore wearily. They had been here for three weeks, now, and it had been three weeks of pure, unadulterated hell. The dank, steamy air made every breath a painful effort and, day and night, giant insects made their life miserable. They could take the miniature Overton ray gun a little way into the swamp belt but at every step they had to be on the alert for the great reptiles that floundered through the dense undergrowth. And even more, for the deadly plant life that lay in wait.

And always they were under watch from the natives. Scaly-hided men, not much past the anthropoid stage, but the crude wooden spears they used could be very dangerous. The Overton ray gun was scaled down to near zero for use against the fungus stumps but it could be turned up to full power for its original use as a weapon. And the gun had saved their lives on more than one occasion when those wooden spears began to fly past them. It was a tense, miserable life.

But they did find the rhizoids. Not as many as they had hoped for, because the Overton gun could be taken into the swamp belt only a little way, but they found far, far more than had ever been brought out before. Day after day the tiny hoard of stones grew. Night after night the three men sat around the cabin of the Space Lark, gloating over them. At least Bill Olger and the Martian D'ulio did. Only Mallard was sullen and dissatisfied. Once he put his feelings into words.

"Look. You two are all steamed up because we've got a handful of these things. A handful that's got to be divided three ways. Do you know how long your share's going to last once you hit the bright lights in Venusport? Well, I'll tell you. A year, two years. Maybe three years if you're careful. You might be satisfied with that but I'm not. Me, I want those hundreds of millions we were talking about when we started this thing. Yes, and if I can figure out some way of getting

further into this damned swamp I'll get them, too."

Olger looked at him in unconcealed disgust. "I can understand a man being a bum loser, Mallard, but not a bum winner. You know that we've already gone as far into the swamp belt as we can with the Overton and if you think I'm going into that hellhole without the ray gun, you're crazy. It makes my skin crawl to think of the narrow escapes we've had, even with it. Be reasonable, fella."

Mallard nodded glumly. He knew, of course, that Olger was right, but the nightly sight of the rhizoids, softly gleaming in his hands, was raising a fever in his brain that would not be stilled. If there was only some way to establish contact with the natives, maybe get a guide. He fondled the rhizoid in his fingers and stared thoughtfully at the sultry fires within its depths.

The next day he started making overtures to a native girl they had dubbed Tiny. The natives they had seen flitting about the swamp seemed to average around seven feet tall but Tiny was not much larger than an Earth girl. She seemed very young, barely out of her childhood, although they had no way of knowing the age of these natives. Like youngsters of any race, she was filled with curiosity and she often hung around the outskirts of the camp after her tribesmen had been driven away.

Mallard set to work winning her confidence the same way he would have done with a wild animal. The first time she was alone he squatted down on the ground and made encouraging sounds toward the fern tree behind which she hid. Then he took a piece of Earth candy from his pocket, nibbled at it, made sounds of delight, and threw it on the ground before her. He walked away and when he looked back and saw her pick up the candy, he knew that he had made a start. In another two days, he was squatting on the ground, a few feet from her, trying to learn the rudiments of her language.

It was no easy task he had set for himself. Her language was a series of barking consonants that were terribly hard for his Terran vocal chords to form and her thought processes were so primitive that it was like trying to talk to a four-year-old child in a strange language.

But he did progress to the point where he could communicate simple ideas to her. Then he made the mistake of telling her that he wanted to find more of the rhizoid bearing fungus. Many, many more of them. When she understood what he wanted, she ran away and he did not see her again for nearly a week.

And when he did see her again it was almost too late for her to be of any further use to him. He was prospecting alone, that day, Olger and D'ulio having set out to explore another section of the swamp belt. He had gone only a little way into the swamp when he saw Tiny struggling, half mad with fear, in the grip of two burly natives. They were tying her with vines to a fallen log and another native was coming forward, carrying something in his arms.

Suddenly Mallard swore incredulously. The third native was carrying one of the white fungus stumps in his arms, carrying that deadly thing as carelessly as he would have carried a stick of wood! And then Mallard saw that he was wearing a helmet on his head, a metal helmet, ringed by some sort of crystal stones. The helmet was pouring a protective flood of soft green light downward, completely covering the native's body. He seemed unharmed by the green light but the spores from the fungus stump were shriveling the instant they were touched by the light.

Mallard leaped forward, then, his blaster spitting wildly. His first shot brought down the native with the helmet and the other two went down a moment later. When he rushed forward and took the helmet off the dead native, Tiny cowered down on the ground, her child eyes rolling up fearfully at him. Mallard ignored her as he bent his head over the helmet.

The thing was made of some purplish metal that was like nothing he had ever seen anywhere in the System. Certainly it had never been constructed by these primitive people and Mallard wondered briefly what alien race from what far distant star had left it here in these fetid swamps.

But he was too filled with wild exultation to waste much time in idle speculation. The thing that mattered was that he now had a really perfect device for getting out the rhizoids. He alone had it! Let Olger and

D'ulio keep their cumbersome Overton ray gun and squirm around the edge of the swamp belt with it. With this thing he could go deep inside the belt and bring out all the rhizoids he could carry.

And he was savagely determined to keep them when he brought them out. Let Bill Olger and D'ulio go back with him, carrying a basketful of those wonderful stones? Why, within hours after they hit Venusport, half the riff-raff of the space lanes would know about their discovery and be heading for Mercury. No, when he lifted the Space Lark off Mercury, Olger and the Martian simply wouldn't be aboard. The thought of murder raised no particular horror in his brain. He had killed before. He whirled about and looked down at the cowering native girl.

"You—belong me—now. You—take me—to these."

He showed her a couple of the rhizoids. Tiny looked back at the swamp behind her and whimpered like a beaten puppy just once. Then she nodded her head slowly. Mallard grinned with satisfaction as he bent down to cut her loose.

THE girl led Mallard back into the very heart of the swamp belt. The journey was sheer nightmare. Hour after hour they plodded on while Mallard's body was soaked with sweat and his lungs seemed ready to burst from the steamy air. But the feel of those stones in his pocket somehow kept him plodding along after the naked girl ahead of him. Those stones had magic in them.

It seemed long eons before he saw Tiny come to a halt and looked fearfully around her. From her evident fright, Mallard guessed she was in a taboo place. She made a furtive gesture and he hurried up to her. He reached the spot where she stood and drew in his breath with a shuddering gasp.

The swamp had thinned out at this point and there before him was a whole grove of the white fungus stumps! They stood in serried ranks, like a yardful of ghosts and Mallard knew that within those white stumps there was a fortune that no space rat had ever dreamed of before.

He broke into a stumbling run forward, the girl completely forgotten. At the edge of the grove he paused only a moment to make sure the shielding light of the helmet was

properly adjusted. Then he swung his blade down upon one of the white stumps. It split easily and he drew forth a perfect rhizoid, larger than any they had found so far. For a moment he held it shakily in his hand. Then he slipped it into the leather pouch he carried on his belt.

In little more than an hour Mallard had filled the pouch he carried. He was working like a madman, now, the sweat pouring from him in torrents, and he was numb with fatigue but the fever in his brain swept away all thoughts of stopping.

He wanted more of these gleaming stones. He wanted to fill his pockets with them, carry them away in his cupped hands. He was still moving forward on tottering feet when he heard Tiny scream. He whirled about savagely, his hand darting to the small blaster at his belt.

A tangled horde of Mercurian warriors was pouring out of the swamp into the clearing. Their bestial faces were twisted with rage and their wooden spears raised menacingly. Even as Mallard turned and sprinted back, those wooden spears were flying past his head. He ducked down behind a log, the native girl crouched, whimpering like a puppy, beside him.

Mallard put the helmet and the bag of rhizoids down beside him and began picking off the scaly hided warriors, one by one. He fired carefully, anxious to conserve the remaining charges in his small hand blaster. In his mind was a new dread.

He knew that, long ago, Bill Olger and the Martian would have returned to the Space Lark and found him gone. They would immediately set out looking for him and the sound of this fight would draw them to him. They must not find him with his pouch full of rhizoids! Never would he share those stones with any one else, that much he knew.

Suddenly he saw something that caused him to open his eyes in stark disbelief. One of the warriors in that milling throng was wearing another helmet, an exact duplicate of the one lying beside him. And he was carrying a fragment from one of those deadly fungus stumps in his hands! Holding it ready to hurl the moment he was close.

Mallard started to put on his own helmet, then realized that in his prone position it

would not shield him. He let it lie and started firing more rapidly, trying to reach the wearer of that helmet. He ducked aside as one of the spears barely missed him and heard a moan of anguish from the girl beside him. One of the spears had gone into her side and blood was pouring from the wound.

From out in the swamp, there was the sound of signal shots, followed by loud shouts. It was Olger and D'ulio and they were not far away. Mallard began firing at top speed, now, and the Mercurians fell like tenpins. The moaning girl beside him he ignored. And then the whole action exploded into nightmare.

The Mercurian with the helmet stepped forward and called out a peremptory command to the girl. And she answered! Snatching up the pouch of rhizoids, she jumped clear of the log and started hobbling painfully toward her own people. At the same moment, Mallard saw big Olger and D'ulio leap out into the clearing, guns drawn.

For one long moment, Mallard stared in horrified fascination at the girl carrying away the thing that mattered more than life itself to him. Then he had leaped clear of the log and was sprinting after her. As in a slow motion picture, he saw Olger and D'ulio firing into the tangled mass and saw the helmeted Mercurian warrior raise the fragment of deadly white fungus.

For just a split part of a second he started to turn, to jump back and reach that protective helmet behind the log. But the limping girl was so close. Only another step. He reached forward for the leather pouch and the fungus landed directly at his feet!

A cloud of fine spores lifted up like a puff of smoke and Mallard felt pain greater than he had ever known man could experience. He felt himself falling, literally pulled to the ground by the wave of pain that was tightening every muscle in his body into an individual agonized knot. From a long way off he heard some one screaming and knew that it was his own voice.

Mallard was no longer conscious of the action all around him. True, he could dimly sense the horde of scaly hided Mercurians rushing panic stricken past him and he could hear that monotonous screaming that was his own voice. But the only thing that really

existed for him was the hundreds of knots of agony in his own paralyzed body.

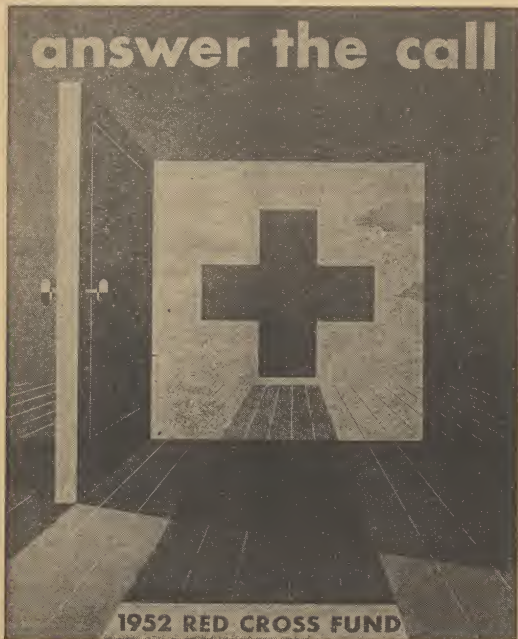
The only thing? From the corner of his eyes he could see the pouch of rhizoids lying almost touching him and he tried to force his agonized body into one last effort to cover it before he called out to Olger and the Martian to put the helmet on him. That helmet would stop the searing pain, yes, but if only he could hold out for one moment longer—just one moment. Long

enough to hide those glorious gems with his body—

He tried and found that he could not move one inch. He gave up the effort and drew in one last breath to call out to them, to tell them to put the helmet on him.

And he could not speak! The poison of the spores had already reached his vocal chords.

He was still screaming with his eyes when the others came up to him.



THE LUMINOUS BLONDE

By HAYDEN HOWARD

Some dames are bright. Some brighter. Like the gorgeous wife of the playboy Commish who combined all the stellar attributes necessary to slice in two parts an ultra modern spaceship, and a marriage, with one swoop of a clockhand.

AS THE frilly-bloused rockette bent over him to unbuckle his safticorsette, newly appointed Commissioner-For-Economics-For-Mars J. Edwin Elbert peeked. But her fingernails tatted so hastily at the buckle that he raised his surprisingly youthful blue eyes to her face. She was blushing there too. A pretty little baby face.

Skillfully he swallowed a rising belch that was a natural consequence of the cessation of gravity upon a paunch overbloomed with farewell champagne, Venus-dipped cold crab and too sweet apricot bread.

"Director Hugens is to be congratulated upon his choice of rockettes," he rumbled, sneaking his fat, glossily manicured fingers about her wrist. The click of the powderroom door would warn him of his wife's return. "Just the other day I was telling him that the new Bolo II should have only the best. I see he has exceeded even my most hopeful expectations."

She giggled nervously.

"Tell me my dear, when does the Bolo go into Hugens' celebrated centrigrav? This weightlessness is rather unsettling to one's stomach."

"Can I get you a demamine pill, sir?"

"No, thank you. When does—"

"Oh! At 1900 hours," she gushed.

"The ship splits in half," she added helpfully, and dimpled in that winning way of little girls who will never grow up.

"Remarkable. They tell me some sort of cable will tie us together."

"Yes sir, when we are far enough out in space so there isn't any air friction, Mr. Webley, the pilot, pulls a little lever and the nose flies off. He'll be all alone out there for forty-two days."

"And only a thin cable connects our passenger section to his control section?"

He was quite familiar with the details since he had lobbied for the initial appropriation. Her forearm had a nice warm smooth feeling.

"Oh, you understand it perfectly, sir. When we're a mile apart a little rocket in the side makes us spin round and round. Then I can take off these old iron shoes." She followed his gaze to her legs and giggled.

He speculated that similar magnets must be holding down the hem of her nylon skirt.

"And does this spinning about a common axis continue until we near Mars?"

"Yes sir, for forty-two days. Excuse me sir, I think null gravity is making that lady ill."

After carefully wiping his palm on his coatsleeve he replaced his unlit cigar in his broad, gleaming face. He was in the smiling sensuality of a daydream when the powder-room door clicked.

His wife was beautiful.

Uptilting his cigar he watched her drift down the aisle. With one scarlet-tipped finger she prevented her diaphanous skirt from floating very high above her knees. A lovely lady. He champed on the cigar. It's not every man whose wife is a natural blonde ex-starlet young enough to be his daughter.

But a little discipline was in order.

"LANDA, I wish you had remembered to have Hykato pack my golf things."

"Edwin please, this null gravity is upsetting my tummy."

"Well, it's the least you could have done."

"And how would we have gotten it on the ship?" her voice shrilled unexpectedly. "You embarrassed me enough as it was."

"Listen, I'm the Commissioner. No two-



She rose and floated down the aisle, taking little care to suppress her rising, diaphanous skirt.

bit pilot is going to tell me what I can't take. The luggage limit is ridiculous!"

"What are you complaining about? He let you take everything, didn't he?"

"After you smiled at him."

"I was only trying to be pleasant."

"Pleasant is it? Last time you said it was to influence him to take all my luggage."

"Yeah and you got sore because you weren't a big enough shot to swing the deal alone," her voice rasped through its ladylike veneer.

"That's a lie. Furthermore I don't want to catch you smiling at him again."

"I give up," she exclaimed and reached for a telegam.

But he wouldn't drop it there. "I didn't like that fellow's looks. Pads in his shoulders, little waxed mustache. Who does he think he is, Captain Future?"

"Oh, don't be funny. Just think what he thinks of you after what you said to him in front of all the other passengers and crew."

"Taking his side now?"

"I am not." She gave a little sniff and fumbled for her handkerchief. "You're so mean and masterful I'm surprised you don't make me go up front and tell him what a sap he is."

"He was a sap smiling at my wife all right." He uplifted his cigar with a mollified grin. "He wasted a smile there. Two-bit pilot, who does he think he is?"

"He did smile at me though," she appended in a small voice.

His voice snapped out again: "And you smiled back!" He ground his unlit cigar into the ash tray. "I think you were just now trying to flatter me; I think you were trying to turn me off the track when you said you'd go up and tell him what a sap he is."

"I was not."

"Don't try to wiggle out of it. That's what you said."

"All right, if you think I should, I will."

"Well now—" He paused smiling and carefully trimmed the crushed end of his cigar with a gold plated cigar cutter before he continued: "If you insist, go ahead."

"There's not much time left," she said, pointing at the neon-dialed clock above the powder-room door. Beneath it hung an orange luminescent sign: U. S. Eastern

Standard Earth Time Equivalent.

"1850 hours," he snorted. "Don't try to wiggle out on that account. You have a half hour."

"O. K., if you say so," she shrugged and chewed the inside of her cheek. "This isn't very nice."

"Let's not get that way. You coolly slip the shaft in me enough. And stop powdering your nose."

Without another word she rose and floated down the aisle, taking little care to suppress her skirt. Somebody whistled and the Commissioner angrily craned his thick neck around. He couldn't see who had done it. But he suspected the three grinning Cadet Astronauts in the last row of seats.

As the door to the control room clanged shut, the powder-room door clicked open and the rockette tapped out on her iron shoe-soles. Commissioner Elbert rolled his eyes and smiled, but she seemed preoccupied with a smaller female with pigtailed and the hiccups.

Guess I'll have a look forward myself, he thought. Just like a woman to go up there, wait in the hall a minute and come back.

Rising, he floated past the rockette toward the control room door.

"Don't open that, sir. The ship's about to separate."

"What? It's only 1855 hours."

"That is Eastern Standard Time, sir. The clock at the other end of the aisle, over the men's room, gives the Standard Star Time our ship schedule operates on."

Those neon hands pointed at 1900.

With a strangled yell he lunged for the door, but as his hand closed about the handle something clicked and it resisted his straining and then his pounding fists.

A buzzer sounded and a cheery masculine voice spoke over the intercom. "Hello again passengers, this is your pilot Hugh Webley wishing you a pleasant crossing. Please re-enter your safticorsettes. The Bolo II, will now separate."

"Intercom," the Commissioner shouted. Shoving past the slack-jawed rockette, he literally swam down the gravityless aisle to the engineering hatchway. It opened to his shouts.

"Yeah?" A giant with a handlebar mustache peered up at him.

"I'm Commissioner Elbert. Call your pilot at once. I order the ship not to separate."

HASTILY the giant lifted the phone. Commissioner Elbert could hear the steady buzz.

"Sorry sir, Webley's cut us off. He does that so no one will interrupt him while he's setting the auto controls."

"Get him somehow. My wife's up there."

The giant coughed and strangled and turned his face away. "I'll keep trying sir," he gasped. "But sometimes he cuts us off for days. He sleeps a lot."

"Forehatch," the Commissioner shouted suddenly. "Unlock the forehatch."

Wearily the giant clambered up. He towered above Elbert.

"Didn't you hear what I said," the Commissioner yelled. "Unlock the door to the control room."

"Sorry sir, the lock's automatic."

"Well dammit, blast it down."

Noisily the giant scratched his crewcut. "Maybe I could crowbar it."

"Quick, you fool."

"No, I can't. I can't sir. The ship might separate while the hatch was open and our own air pressure would blow us all into the vacuum. I can't risk the lives of our passengers, sir."

"I'm Commissioner Elbert. Give me that crowbar."

The giant held it behind him.

"That's an order."

"Sorry sir, better reclaim your seat before the jolt." The giant signalled with his fingers at the rockette.

Elbert snatched at the crowbar. As the two men grappled for it, whirling like fighting cocks in the air, a tremendous surge hurled them the length of the aisle. Another slammed them against the powder-room door. When the giant helped the

bleeding Commissioner to his feet, artificial gravity held them down.

Emitting motherly sounds, the rockette tried to wipe the blood from his forehead. But he shoved her aside.

"I'll sue. I'll have your transport license revoked."

"Please sir," the rockette squeaked, "I'll bring you a sedative."

"Hugens will hear about this," he shouted, writhing in the engineer's brawny arms. But then he sobbed: "I sent her up there. My fault, my idea, she didn't want to go. She was worried about the time and I told her there was plenty of time."

As he gulped the sedative he looked like a punctured balloon.

"I don't want a sedative," he shouted. But he had just swallowed it. He sagged again. "My fault. I told her there was plenty of time." He rubbed his sleeve across his nose.

After they had settled him groggily in his seat, the rockette drew the engineer aside. Her pretty little brow wrinkled.

"Dan, I can't figure it. Why does he think it's his fault? Gee, when we were in the powder-room together she asked me about why the clocks told different times, and I explained how we figure time by positions of stars instead of the earth and sun and all that stuff. You'd think she'd understood. She talked bright enough."

The giant squeezed her arm affectionately. Lucky Webley, sap Commish, bright dame. Forty-two days and an alibi.

He chuckled and walked his fingers up her arm.

"Carol, you can't ever tell. All dames don't have the same amount of brightness you do."

She giggled and shivered a little at his hand. "We learned all about time in rockette school."



AS IT WAS

By PAUL L. PAYNE

In a cruel Cosmos one lived only to be killer or killed. The One proved that. It killed a hundred times a day. Thisbe II was its blood-red preserve . . . and now, throwing the challenge in Its myriad faces was Pritchard, the brightest name in big-game hunting throughout the length and breadth of Galaxy A.

DAWN on Thisbe II was much like dawn on Terra, except for the color. The giant star Piramus lifted its magenta disk above the little planet's foreshortened horizon and, in that brief moment, sent orange corona flares shimmering out from its limb. An odd ionization effect caused faint ripples of light to flicker in the purple sky above.

As the sun ascended, the magenta brightened into a crimson dazzle with a lavender

halo. The flanks of distant mountains flamed curiously, as if their sides were smooth and polished mirrors.

Yet nothing gleamed with such intensity as the good ship *Apollo*, towering a hundred and ten feet on her fins. Her surface—chrome-plated nickel-steel coated with a thick porcelain glaze—was expressly designed to bounce back every slightest beam of light.

So she stood now like a flaming sword, in



the center of a wide black circle, the area of yesterday's landing burn, and lay across it a wide fan of reflected sunlight. Presently, a thing like an enormous grasshopper-leg unfolded from her side. In its grasp was something that looked like a tray full of erect ants. The tray touched ground softly, the ants walked off and became men, and the long derrick folded back into the *Apollo*, taking the tray with it.

The men left on the ground stood looking about them eagerly. After some of the barren, hostile worlds they had visited this one seemed little short of Paradise. From the eminence on which the ship stood they could look in every direction at rolling hills, among which clumps of feathery foliage rose profusely, and occasional startling upthrusts of rock, like clubs brandished from underground, leaning in every possible angle and having frequently such straight planes of cleavage that they almost seemed artificial. Olive-hued hills and dramatic fists of rock alike marched off to a disturbingly close-appearing horizon, where began a sky that was not blue but lavender.

They stamped the ground. It was one thing to have watched this wonder swell on the visiscreens as the ship tore around on its landing orbit, and to have craned and peered through the heavy leaded glass of the viewports after the landing in yesterday's sunset. Neither of these quite matched the delight of seeing it all with unaided and unimpeded vision. They smelled the air, so rich and invigorating after the ship's mustiness.

They were all young but one. And this one faced them now, a tall, saturnine man, but with an amusement lurking in his dark, deep-set eyes. "Attention, cadet hunters," he said briskly, "let's have another equipment check."

They rolled their eyes at him and quirked their mouths in simulated resignation. Yet the readiness with which they formed a semi-circle about him showed their pride in obeying his orders. They knew they were lucky to be under Pritchard, the brightest name in planetary big game hunting throughout the length and breadth of Galaxy A.

For each of them had fought hard for his place in this latest expedition to be led by Pritchard. The ex-pilot-turned-sportsman

regularly accepted certain hardy young neophytes of the chase as assistants on his expeditions; some aspired to follow in his footsteps and others merely sought the thrills and danger that lurked along the unknown trails of far-flung worlds.

EACH one now showed his regular and special equipment to Pritchard. But first, they held out their snappers—the light Thorp-Snell hand rocket-tube that launched a high explosive needle, deadly up to a thousand yards. Pritchard inspected load and action, and then thumbed the gleaming edge of each man's chopper, or machet which had been derived from the old Terran hatchet and machete combined. It was really a long, broad blade with a flattened-out, hatchet-shaped head.

The special equipment consisted of a squawkie, the portable radio, carried by the phlegmatic Sturgis; the cam-rec, a light camera and tape recorder combined, slung over Kemp's plump shoulders; the flamer, or flame-thrower, its full plastic tank strapped to Majinski's back; the two packets of synthetabs or food concentrates enough for a week for them all should they get lost—hung to the belt of red-headed McManus; and the first-aid kit strapped to Pritchard's own lean shoulders. To the remaining five men would fall the pleasure of carrying all this stuff back when the little scouting party returned.

At last Pritchard beckoned to the squawkie-man and spoke into its 'phragm. "All set, Cap. See anything?" The voice of Captain Savage, high above the rocket batteries in the towering nose, came back as a thin rasping. His report was negative. "Must be a lull between the night carnivores and the daytime ruminants. Looks like a few flocks of birds far away."

"Fine. We'll head east and dig around in that jungle down there a bit. We'll turn back after noon chow."

The captain's "Good hunting" ended with a click. Pritchard turned calmly and started walking off the hard gloss the *Apollo's* hell-breathing stern tubes had made of this once-grassy spot, into the blackened wisps and dust. The men followed him in a loose, straggling group, ten men in all, swaggering for the benefit of the envious eyes of

those remaining in the ship.

McManus strode rapidly until he had caught up with the tall hunter. The red-haired boy's idolatry was plain in his wide blue eyes.

"Why the jungle?" he said. "Why are you tackling the jungle, Mr. Pritchard?"

"Just for a sample. Also as a check. The whole planet's like this. Can't land anywhere without being near the jungles that seem to fill up every valley. I don't like cover like that so close to the ship. I want to see what's in it."

"Think we'll knock over anything?"

"Not trying for it," said Pritchard shortly. He punched the younger man on the biceps. "And unkink that trigger-finger of yours, hero boy."

McManus grinned shamefacedly. "Ah, change your tapes, will you? I only need one mistake to learn."

Pritchard snorted. "On that Deneb asteroid, you promised. You seemed to understand. Then you thought you'd like one of those big clamshells for a souvenir. Remember what came out of those shells after you fired?"

The boy moved his shoulders. "Remember! I dream about them regularly every tenth night."

"I'm also thinking about a man named Munson." Pritchard's tone had become soft and musing. "That name mean anything to you?"

McManus shrugged. "There must be a million Munsons. None of 'em ever meant anything to me."

"Every hunter remembers Munson," said Pritchard flatly. "And everybody on Terra remem—"

Something squeaked under his foot. Pritchard flung himself sideways into the blackened stubble, rolled, and came up in a crouch, snapper at ready, while McManus stood blinking at him. Pritchard came back slowly, narrowed gaze riveted on the spot where he had stepped. McManus backed away, raising his own snapper. The rest of the men came running up.

Pritchard knelt and picked up something. It was stiff and charred and smelt acridly, but the men clustering around could see it had six legs. There was a click and a whirr

as Kemp started the cam-rec.

Then McManus said, "I'll be damned" and picked up something else. It squealed and squirmed in his hand, and it also had six legs.

"What is it?" queried Majinski over his shoulder. "Rabbit?"

"Or squirrel," put in Greene, a rangy blond boy.

"Some kind of rodent, anyway," said Pritchard. He ran a finger the wrong way through baby fur and the little sharp muzzle flicked around to snap at him. He stood up. "The mother shielded it from our stern jet-wash. She died that Junior might live." He wiped his hands on his cordron breeches. "Bring it along, Tom. We'll drop it in the tall grass."

By the time they reached the tall grass beyond the perimeter of the burn, Tom McManus had become attached to the little fur-ball, with its whiskery nose and knob-like feet, and found that it snuggled nicely in his breast pocket. Pritchard smiled indulgently and they all waded into the waist-high grass.

THEY went slowly, partly out of caution and partly because the long, thick-growing blades clogged and bunched around their legs. Little things went hopping and chittering out of their way, and the sun began to lay its heat on them. Birds, as yet unseen, called and cried and whistled in the dense growth ahead.

They went down a long slope, and then bushes began to shoulder up above the grass-tips and trees sprang up, some arching their feathery fern-like trunks until they began to lace together overhead and others dangling enormous round leaves from long drooping stems.

The transition to jungle was gradual, with more and more sunlight filtered out of the growing shade, and vines and creepers becoming abundant about the ankles. The choppers appeared and began swinging and slashing, and all were grateful for the shade and its attendant coolness. Something crashed heavily away, hidden by the dark brown-green wall before them.

It began to be real jungle. Pritchard stopped before a sturdy hedge. He had chopped into it and found a long tough root

from which the heavy chopper only seemed to bounce back.

"Hell," he grunted as McManus came up. "Joe," he called, "let's have the flamer here."

"Ah, what's the matter with you!" grinned McManus. He took his own chopper between both hands and raised it high over his head. "You must be . . . getting . . . old!" And he brought the heavy blade down with all his force.

Pritchard had stepped back, amusement twisting his lips. Majinski was shouldering forward with the flamer's nozzle ready. The chopper's edge chunked into the root—

And it came alive. The whole length of it flailed up into the air, flinging the whirling chopper off into the gloom. The next instant the air was full of writhing ropey lengths that whipped down on the men, lashing thick branches off as they came.

"Look out!" yelled Pritchard needlessly, as the men cowered and ducked, arms flung over their heads.

Then something whipped about him hard, stinging and driving the breath from him. He felt himself swung up, his arms pinioned.

He caught a glimpse of other bodies rising with him, heard hoarse screaming and yelling.

Branches lashed by him and suddenly he was looking down on the jungle from high in the air, looking down on a sea of foliage, big, dish-shaped leaves lying atop the spreading ferns. Then he was curving down again, dizzily.

He saw it. A great maw, like the throat of an orchid, with a fringe of giant tentacles. It seemed to be rushing up at him.

Fighting to free his arms, he realized they were not held below the elbows. By crossing over with his left hand, he could draw his snapper and shift its butt into his right.

But he was descending into that obscenely working orifice, choking on its acrid stench, before he could manage it. The little needles went tseu, tseu, tseu, down into the quivering pulp. They could be death for him at this range. Pritchard, dangling there in that moment of eternity, could only avert his face from the crisp blasts gusting back at him.

Abruptly he was flying through the air,

his arms free. The snapper arced off in one direction and Pritchard went into his own gyrating, twisting, writhing parabola. A frond slapped him. A branch snapped under his hip. He was falling into foliage. A thick stem slithered along his hand and he grabbed at it, to hang on through an insane pendulum swing that carried him whisperingly close to the ground.

They found him crumpled at the foot of the tree against which he had been dashed.

Yet, within five minutes, he was reporting back to the ship that the party was intact. The giant hydra-type plant, in its death throes, had flung only him. The others had been held adangle in mid-air while it chose to feed on Pritchard first and, although he had been sent sailing, the tentacles gripping the others had simply loosened. One man, dropped upside down from ten feet, had a fractured collarbone, but they were even now cementing a flexicast in place and he would continue with the rest. Majinski had had the flamer torn from his hand and they weren't able to find it.

In fifteen minutes they were hacking steadily ahead again, more slowly now that they had no flamer, and having to stop to trace every creeper to its root before they chopped through it.

Pritchard straightened up from a tangle he'd been attacking and eased his bruised and aching back. He peered ahead into light-flecked gloom, the matted mass of vine, creeper and branch that grew so chokingly high they were virtually tunneling through. They would find no game this way, he reflected, their chopping and hacking and swearing spreading the alarm well ahead. The birds, for instance, had stopped singing. He glanced briefly to his left at young McManus grunting and swinging.

"Tom." Pritchard's tone was casual, but his eyes were alert and hard. The red-headed man held his stroke and peered ludicrously under his armpit.

"Freeze," said Pritchard.

The boy went rigid. "What is it?"

"On the branch above you." Pritchard's voice cracked out above the ringing blades. "Hold it, everybody! Hold it!" Then, in a lower tone, he gave orders, and the three or four cadet hunters near McManus slowly began to ease out their snappers. The cam-rec

clicked into action.

"For the cripes sake, what is it?" whispered McManus, the red of exertion washing out of his face until it was a dripping ivory mask.

"I don't know." Pritchard began waving his arms slowly to attract the attention of the thing eighteen inches above that red hair. "I'd call it a scorpion if it didn't look like a spider. I'd call it a spider if it didn't look like a scorpion. It's not quite as big as a sheepdog." He uttered a chirping whistle and continued to wave his arms.

"For the love of God, blast it, then."

"I didn't finish telling you about Munson," remarked Pritchard conversationally. "Way back in 2018, he started the Venusian War—"

"Must we have a history lesson now?" said McManus through clenched teeth.

II

THE thing above him made a convulsive movement, a quick clutching with its claws as if preparing to spring. McManus's face went from ivory to a dirty snow color. But the thing remained motionless, except that under its gleaming yellow carapace Pritchard could see its thorax pulsing evilly.

"Munson," Pritchard went on dryly, his arms still flapping away, although the spider-scorpion paid no apparent attention, "Munson was a great scientist. He trapped a big beetle and experimented on it for a week or so. Then he killed it for dissection. He had no idea it was a Citizen of Venus."

"Oh, I see," said the other sarcastically. "You're afraid to shoot this thing. It might be what passes for human on this mud-ball. If it drops on me, of course—"

"Shut up!" Pritchard dropped his hand to his snapper. The thing had stood up slowly, its segmented tail curving stiffly up behind it. "I think it's going to strike. You talk too much."

He brought the snapper up. "I'll do it, boys. I've got the clearest shot—"

A sharp hiss broke from the jungle. The spidion (as he thought of calling it) jerked its ugly head about. Pritchard turned and caught his breath with a sharp intake. McManus slowly lifted his head to follow Pritchard's gaze. His chopper fell from his

hand. All about them, men stood on tiptoe or stooped or craned sideways to look. Somebody said, "A woman!" Kemp panned the cam-rec about wildly until he caught her in its viewer.

She stood, straight and slim, on a gnarled stub protruding from a thick tree-trunk, some ten feet from the ground and about twenty feet from Pritchard, who was nearest her. Her honey-colored hair fell in crudely cut locks to her shoulders, framing a youthful, cleanly-chiseled face from which gray-green eyes gazed steadily. A strip of hide between her legs joined another strip of hide at her waist, from which hung a plaited grass sheath holding a long, narrow-bladed knife. A third strip of hide had the obvious main function of binding down her billowing breasts, rather than concealing them. Her skin had been tanned an even nut-brown all over.

From her lips came that sharp hiss again and she slapped her thigh smartly. The spidion was gone in a scuttling rush. McManus sagged weakly to the ground and drew a thick forearm across his forehead. "Geez, thanks, sister," he muttered.

"What are you doing here?" The girl's voice rang out through the jungle's stillness.

"Hunting," replied Pritchard.

"Hunting what?"

"Anything." He smiled up at her. "Anything big and tough. What are you doing here?"

He could just make out the corner of her mouth lifting in disdain. "What do you mean by 'anything big and tough'?"

Pritchard liked to have his own questions answered, too. "Who are you, anyway?" he rapped out sternly. "How come you speak Terran English? Where's the rest of your party?"

The girl only frowned down at him. "By what right do you come tramping in here killing all my people?"

"All your *what*?" Pritchard blinked.

"People, people, people. There are beings on this world who live and breathe and think just like you. But you seem to think it's all right to come in and kill them. For sport."

Gazing up into those blazing emerald eyes and that delicious figure, Pritchard felt an unaccustomed tingling through his nerves.

Any woman, however crippled, deformed or aged, could provoke some excitement after the prison of deep space. But this beauty—

He glanced sideways at McManus who had moved up alongside him. The redhead had a feral grin on his freckled mug.

"Relax," muttered Pritchard from the corner of his mouth. "This one's for me."

He said to the girl. "We haven't killed anything, certainly not any people." The vision of that carbonized carcass back on the burn flickered across his mind. "What do you think we are, murderers? You're the first person we've seen."

She cut him off with an impatient gesture. "You're a pack of killers, all of you. I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Hey, Mr. Pritchard," called out Sturgis, "I'll bet she's from that Havilland group. Ask her."

Pritchard cocked his head. "That's right! You are, aren't you? The Havilland Survey sent out by the Astrodetic Board. Unreported for four years. What happened? Where's your base?"

The girl nodded briefly. "And you're Pritchard, the notorious big game hunter. I've heard about you. Nothing good, of course, but I've heard."

PRITCHARD smiled his sweetest smile. "That's right. I'm well known for my slaughter of helpless animals. But, come on, now," he coaxed, "how about a report on your party? The Board will appreciate any little message you care to send it."

The girl gripped a vine as if to steady herself. "Wiped out," she said tersely.

"Oh." He nodded, lips pursed. Then, as if it were an afterthought, he said, "How?"

"What does it matter?" The face above was momentarily tense, withdrawn. "With plenty of synthetabs—and the hydroponics laid out and producing—somebody still had to go out and kill. For fresh meat." Her voice trailed off.

"And—?" Pritchard prompted.

"Oh," she sighed wearily, "they came. They were the ones who got the fresh meat." She shuddered.

"Who's 'they'?"

"Please," she said, "I'd rather not discuss it any more. But I think you'd better leave. Certainly, you'd better not kill anything if

you know what's good for you. Besides, you've done enough damage already."

Pritchard cleared his throat. The men behind him were whispering and snickering. "Speaking of leaving," he said, "how about you? If the Survey was wrecked—"

"I'm not interested in leaving," she said curtly. "I've got work to do here."

"What work?"

"I'm working with the people here."

"Oh, there *are* natives?"

"Certainly. This world is full of people."

He scowled his impatience. "What's their cultural stage?"

She favored him with a one-sided grin. "Some are foraging. A few are gregarious. You met one just now. Fortunately, I got here in time to save her life."

McManus's jaw dropped. "Save *her* life! You don't mean that crawly brute that tried to kill me just now?"

"If she threatened you," said the girl with careful enunciation such as she might use to a child, "it was because you had disturbed her peace."

"And it—she—was what you'd call a person?" demanded Pritchard. "Do you mean that you consider absolutely all the living, moving things here, people?"

The girl nodded firmly. Pritchard gazed at her, pawing his chin.

"Tell me," he murmured, "do they kill one another for fresh meat?"

She sighed. "They still do, but I'm trying to cure them of that. That's the work I'm doing. They only kill, after all, for food. I'm trying to cure them of the killing habit by getting them to switch to synthetabs. I've—"

The rest of her words were drowned in a tidal wave of laughter. The men exploded, beat each other, howled, and fell on the ground. She stared down at them, and her eyes began to smolder anew.

Pritchard fought his own face straight and wheeled on them. "Cut that out!" he yelled. "As you were!" They gurgled back at him, pleading their helplessness, hugging their sides. McManus gripped his cheeks and tried to squeeze his mouth straight, but strangled gusts still shook him.

The spectacle weakened Pritchard's own control and he turned quickly back to the girl. The sight of her beauty, now in a

passionate rage, cut sharply across his mirth. He noticed with interest that the thin strip of hide across those heaving breasts was undergoing maximum strain.

"Please allow me to apologize for my men," he said gravely. "I'm sure they don't mean to be insulting. What is your name, by the way, so I can at least report it to the Board?"

Her chin was up. "Cornelia Boyce," she said haughtily.

"And how did you manage to survive the attack on the Survey camp?"

"I was away." She was calming a little. "They came at sunrise but I wasn't there. I was out, learning to ride one of the—the people."

Pritchard looked down quickly and coughed. Fresh gurgles sounded behind him. The cam-rec whirled on. "But you are all right here? You can take care of yourself?"

"I am in no danger," she said icily. "In four years I have won most of the people over to my side. They protect me. In turn, and in my own way, I protect them. I've learned how to make synthetabs and I also feed them from the 'ponics gardens. And now I'll do my best to protect them from you. I'm sure I can't appeal to your decency but I can appeal to your reason, and perhaps convince you that this is a poor world to hunt in."

"Now, listen, Miss Boyce," Pritchard cut in patiently, "we're not here on a mission of slaughter. I gather, and please correct me if I'm wrong, that you're one of that group back on Terra that opposes big game hunting."

"You are completely correct about that," she interposed.

"—and are pushing through legislation to make it illegal under the Space Code. But we already adhere to the Space Code. We are most zealous, I assure you, to avoid bagging anything parahuman, anything that exhibits anything like human intelligence. We—"

"That's precisely why you should abandon your hunting here. My good man, just what do you consider intelligence?" She held up her hand to prevent his answering. "For instance, a good many of the what you would call animals on this little planet have developed a spoken language. And I don't mean

a mother's warning to her cubs, or one male challenging another. I mean, for instance, the news I received this morning." She smiled. "Would you like to know what a little bird told me?"

He nodded. "I'm all ears."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "it wasn't such a little bird, and it wasn't exactly news to me. After all, I'd seen your braking jets in the ionosphere and heard the cavitation rumble when you were settling into denser atmosphere in your orbit. But, anyway, here's what my birdie told me: 'A thing with sun-fire at both ends has come down out of the sky two flights from here. Now a flock of two-legged beasts from it are attacking the plants. We don't understand!' " Her face relaxed into a disconcerting smile. "They couldn't understand why you were so angry with the grass and the trees!"

"Extremely funny," he said gravely. "It just happens to be meaningless, also."

"Don't you see? They can communicate ideas!"

"Fine," he nodded. "What of it?"

"But—but that means they're intelligent. Too intelligent to be called 'animals'!"

HE SHOOK his head. "On Terra only one animal developed communications to a high degree. But we long ago decided that some other animals were fairly intelligent, for all that they didn't appear to speak among themselves. On many other worlds—and I can name you a score I've visited—lots of so-called 'animals', apart from the intelligences we dealt with, had developed fairly complex methods of communications that would put the old Terran elephants and ants to shame. That still didn't make them what we called 'people'."

Her eyes were hot with scorn. "I know that! If you'd lived with the Thisbeans as long as I have you'd understand. Why—"

"Now, look," said Pritchard with rising asperity, "we have satisfactory means of determining intelligence. If your 'people' are as you claim they're in no danger. But are you going to claim there are no killers here? They're what we're after, intelligent or not. And there are killers on every world, Miss Boyce."

She shook her head in despair at his stupidity. "There are no killers here, Mr.

Pritchard. There are no killers anywhere on any world. Only variant life forms trying to live and eat, eating only to live. If we help them to find food, and guide their impulses. . . ."

Pritchard gave up. The argument was futile. It struck him that the girl was mad. The horror of the attack on the Survey camp, followed by years of isolation from her kind, had left her in a hopelessly deranged state.

And a little plan took shape in his mind.

"That's all very fine," he said, cutting across her words, "but let me show you something that will prove to you we are not here to kill indiscriminately."

He turned to McManus. "Let's have your little pet, Tom." McManus raised his eyebrows, but fumbled the button of his breast pocket flap loose and pulled out the wriggling, six-legged infant rodent. Pritchard took it and held it out toward the girl.

"Here, Miss Boyce. My friend found this. He didn't bite its head off first thing. Now we'll turn it over to you for safekeeping."

"Aw," growled McManus.

"Quiet," Pritchard growled back at him. He lifted the wriggling little beast and it squeaked. "I guess I'd better not toss it."

The eyes of Cornelia Boyce were large and glowing with maternal pity. She dropped lightly to the ground and advanced, holding out her hand. Pritchard pulled back the hand with the little wriggler in it and his other shot forward to grip the girl's wrist.

She gasped and bent backward, striving to wrench loose. Her strength was such that Pritchard, turning to hand the cub back to McManus, almost lost his balance.

"Stop it," she cried. "You don't know what—"

Her lips moved for another second, but the words were lost in the sudden tumult that erupted about them. The jungle exploded, almost seemed to come alive at their very feet. Dimly-seen shapes came lurching and crashing toward them from every side, clambering and trampling and swinging from branch to branch. Here and there a tree cracked, splintered and fell.

The men whipped out their snappers and

backed against each other, eyes rolling nervously in grim set faces. The girl frantically twisted out of Pritchard's fingers and stuck two fingers in her mouth.

A piercing, two-noted whistle stabbed through the mounting din. It stabbed again, and the uproar subsided into a confused rustling and shuffling. Silence fell across the dust-charged air.

All about, in the jungle surrounding the head of the path the scouting party had hacked, the vegetation barely concealed a shoulder-to-shoulder wall of hulking beasts, while smaller animals and what looked like maned gorillas crouched or stood along the bending branches. Tusks protruded from drooling jaws and hundreds of eyes blazed forth steadily.

"No shooting, no shooting!" Pritchard was bellowing. "She has them under control, boys. Hold your fire." Then he took a deep breath and turned toward Cornelia Boyce. She had backed off to a safe distance from him, her eyes twin pools of green contempt.

"My people." She bowed ironically. "At your service."

Pritchard grinned tautly. "You win. Of course, my intentions were only of the best. I thought you ought to come back to Terra for a little observation and examination, but—" he waved lightly—"let's skip it."

"You were lucky that I was able to stop them," she said. "Next time I might not be able to in time. Now if you're wise you'll just take your little ship and go home."

"Why, certainly, certainly." He bowed. "In the meantime it was a pleasure to have met you, Miss Boyce."

"I'm sure," she replied coldly. She lifted her head, and from her lips suddenly poured an astonishing babble, a mixture of coughing, grunting and chirping. There began to be movement in the brush, and some of the things there began lurching and crashing off.

"Where are they going?" Pritchard strove for a casual tone.

"I'm deploying them along your trail," she said with equal calm. "They will escort you out of this jungle and report to me when you re-enter the ship."

"And you were really talking to them?"

She shrugged, as if at a childish question. "Of course."

He studied her, and his long features slid into a crooked, embarrassed smile. "Miss Boyce, I owe you an apology. Maybe you've got something here after all."

She raised weary eyebrows. "If you're quite through looking at my body, you can go now."

He laughed shortly. "I wasn't, especially. Although it's very—"

"Goodbye!"

He bowed again and turned. "All right, boys. You heard what the lady said. Let's pull out of here. And let's keep our little hands away from our snappers, eh? The lady's friends appear to be quite numerous and a little touchy."

III

WITH a few dry, nervous chuckles, the cadet hunters hefted their equipment and started back up the trail. Just as the girl had predicted, shapes rustled in the foliage close by their sides, accompanied by an occasional growl or whine or snort that was somewhat unnerving. Pritchard could occasionally discern the shaggy shoulders of the gorilla-type, and some other lithe and slinking or lumbering shapes— with here and there a hump of slate-gray hide or a ridged, scaly back.

The return along the hacked-out trail was easier and quicker than their coming, and soon they saw the tip of the *Apollo's* bow in the sky beyond the shoulder of the hill. As they toiled back up the slope through the clogging grass, they became aware that the animals were not following them further, but backward glances could still make out some vague shapes in the foliage.

Pritchard became aware, also, of McManus's silence. The redhead, usually garrulous, had been silent from the start of their retreat, his square jaw clamped hard shut. The Chief Hunter slapped the young man's broad back.

"Relax, Tom. Men have backed down from women before. It's not considered bad form at all. Now and then they outmaneuver us, and that's all there is to it."

A couple of the others chuckled, but

McManus continued his stolid slogging up the hill without a sign. Pritchard shrugged. They all trudged across the burn, and the great grasshopper-leg let down the platform for them.

Waiting for it to settle, Pritchard braced with one hand at the base of a towering fin and began slapping dust from his breeches. He heard Sturgis say, "Hey, watch that!" and the tseuu of a snapper.

He jerked erect in time to see McManus lower his weapon, and hear a distant explosion. Down over the hill; in the tall grass, what appeared to be a huge boar or pygmy rhino was writhing and kicking. Somberly, Pritchard watched its six twitching legs quiet down and stiffen.

"That was a good shot, Tom," he said.

McManus came toward him, grinning with relief. "I'd had about all I could take —" he started to say, and then Pritchard's fist slammed into his jaw. His feet left the ground and he fell heavily onto the hard ground under the tubes.

Pritchard was picking him up again when he heard Sturgis's voice again. "You'd better make it snappy, chief. I think they're working up to something."

Shapes were moving up through the distant grass. Wings were flapping or tilted in soaring across the jungle not far beyond. There came to the ship a dim, vast babble of cries, grunts, squeals, howls and barks.

They carried the inert McManus over to the platform in a hurry. But Pritchard let his finger rest on the buzzer-button while he looked over the array of animals now gathering in plain sight, fanning out around the perimeter of the scorched ground.

There were the slate-gray ones, like that which McManus had downed—six-legged, suber-snouted, long-tusked. There were hulking, scaly-hidden ones, resembling ant-eating bears—also six-legged. In fact, the six-legged skeleton seemed to prevail among the fauna of Thisbe II. The canine-like ones running this way and that were six-legged, and so were certain slinking, feline types. On the other hand, the maned gorillas had but four appendages, and so had the ungainly-looking, leaping ones, that looked like hairless kangaroos except for their wicked, underslung jaws.

Quite suddenly, this horde was charging across the burn, converging on the shining cylinder towering above them, aiming for the platform still resting on the ground.

"What's he waiting for?" Pritchard heard the whisper above the rising thunder about them, knew he was meant to hear it. He jabbed home the button and the rising floor pressed their feet. He stepped over to the squawkie and spoke into its phragm. "Chief on, Savage. Hold your fire. We're clear." Turning to the men on the now rapidly rising platform, he said, "No shooting."

Soberly, they all gazed down at the horde sweeping up below, swirling about, bumping into the fins and one another. Their silence, other than the noise of their thousands of feet and hooves, was oppressive and menacing. A few of the leaping ones soared up at the platform, wriggling in mid-air and pawing, but it had gone too high and they fell back.

Then Pritchard glanced up. His hand started for his snapper. Toward them through the air came a cloud of flying things—great leathery-winged birds, smaller, faster, feathered ones—rising on a line of flight that would carry them above the platform to a point of interception, claws distended, beaks open and eager.

Thin and remote, a two-toned whistle sounded. Sounded again. The converging flocks wheeled, fluttered and fell away, gliding off toward the jungle. Far below, the milling horde flung up a varied array of heads, and then began to move, a drift that became a surge, trotting and hopping away across the burn.

"Phew!" said someone behind Pritchard. "That girl really has an army."

McManus sat up, shaking his head and staring at the smooth shining hull of the *Apollo* swinging down to them. He felt his jaw and squinted up at Pritchard.

"Quarters for you," the tall saturnine man said softly.

LATE that evening Pritchard was in the chart room talking with Captain Savage. The *Apollo's* ventilation system had been in operation for over thirty hours now and the blowers had sucked out the last vestige of mechanically purified air, with

its taint of ozone, metal and oil. It was pleasant to rock gently in the gimbal chairs and sniff the lush night air of Thisbe II. Aloft, in the nose, the watch was idly working out a game of kru, that old Martian solitaire involving domino-like counters. The autoscanner hooked to the magnar was ready to clang at the first blip on the screens. Below, in the wardrooms, the cadet hunters were amusing themselves with a runoff of the day's cam-rec spool ("Get this line about the synthetabs!" . . . guffaws of laughter). Midway down the curving tail section Tom McManus sulked in his quarters, fingering the bruise on his jaw.

"So we'll pick up in the morning, hey?" mused the captain. His was a squat, ape-like body, surmounted by a long, goat's face and a grizzled skull.

"Yes." Pritchard drained his tall glass. "I'm not going to bother with her. If she can send a whole army of her animals against us it's going to make hunting a little difficult. We could set down on the other side and maybe get in a bit of shooting, but she'd catch up with us. Even if we try hunting from the air with the jet cruisers. . . ." He shook his head. "It's too dangerous. I've got to look out for these boys, after all. No, I don't want to get messed up with her in any way." He stared calmly at the wall, seeing once again that lithe body straining out of his grasp, and knew himself for a liar.

"Well. . . ." The captain rubbed his nose, furtively eyeing the other man's profile. He knew when a man was lying. It was one of the things one developed long before one got to be a hundred and thirteen years of age. He lowered his wrinkled old eyelids and went on, ". . . she's hung on here for four years. Maybe she isn't too crazy at that. Of course, it's kind of too bad to leave a filly like her running around loose."

"We'll just hope we won't be too much criticized for not bringing her home," Pritchard cut in quickly. "Thank God, we shot all that cam-rec footage. It'll—"

He lifted his head, his long nostrils flaring. "Murder! What's that stink coming from?"

The old man grimaced up at the air grill. "Eugh! Low tide on Venus!"

Pritchard got up and went toward the intercom. "Something's died, I'd say, inside the ship or close by."

At that instant the intercom's tiny diaphragm screamed. Screamed, and broke off into a hoarse babble. The two men froze, scowling at each other. The babble rose again into a sharp screaming "NO!"—and then stopped.

Pritchard stepped to the 'phragm. "Chief on. All stations and quarters report, please."

Voices came back at him out of the wall. "Nose watch. All X here, Mr. Pritchard. What happened?"

"Stern watch. All X, chief. What—?"

"Wardroom, Greene on. All X. Something stinks, chief."

"Engine room. All X."

"Majinski on, retired to quarters. Pee-yew!"

Then, silence, pregnant with listening.

"McManus," snapped Pritchard.

"Louder," said the captain. "He may be asleep."

"McManus!" The tall hunter shouted. "TOM!"

Then he was out the door. The captain strode to the intercom. "All free hands to McManus. Fast!" he barked, and then ran after Pritchard who was already stepping into the axial lift.

McManus's quarters were well down in the tail. Pritchard found half a dozen men clustered at his cabin door which they had torched open. Their eyes were watering and they were gagging at the incredibly foul stench roiling the air.

"Where's McManus?" he demanded, starting to shoulder through them. The stench caught at his throat so that he choked on the words.

A cadet hunter clutched at his sleeve. "Don't go in there, chief," he gasped. "You can't do Tom any good now."

Savage was at the wall intercom. "Meyer, for God's sake, blow this ship out," he yelled hoarsely.

Pritchard shook off the detaining hand and stepped to the open door. He looked once at the dripping mess in the gimbal chair and jerked his head away.

The pie-shaped cubicle was otherwise normal at first glance. The hammock hung suspended between its swivels. The view-

port was properly sealed. The bath and disposal unit in one far corner stood in spotless order, as did the sectional drawer case opposite.

What had come in here? And how had it gotten in? The door had been electro-locked in its sliding frame and the men, who had quite properly not waited for the magnekey Captain Savage alone carried, had had to burn through the lock wiring. There was no other way into the room.

Pritchard stepped over to the air grill. His eyes swimming in the terrible stench in the cabin, he nevertheless could discern how the heavy chrome mesh had been torn loose from its bolts to lie at the foot of the wall. He shot one tortured, speculative glance at the six-inch hole in the wall and then hastily backed out, hand to mouth against his rising gorge.

The steel walls thrummed with the surge of the revved-up blowers. But there was no answering draft screaming up into a gale from the air grills. The lights flickered briefly, and then the blowers' thrum died.

"Shorted," a man muttered thickly.

More men were coming, sliding down the long poles until they reached the stench which was now spreading up through the ship. As soon as it hit their nostrils they gripped the poles to slow their descent, cursing. Down the passageway, two of those who had arrived first were now being sick.

PRITCHARD leaned against the wall trying to keep his breathing shallow, his eyes hard and steady on the open doorway and the lighted chamber beyond. Gradually, all eyes were turning to him, waiting, their owners breathing in short, labored gasps.

He stepped to the intercom. "All hands to the muster deck," he managed to choke out. "That means everybody. And use extreme caution. Something has boarded the ship and killed McManus. Listen to me. It is still on board! Arm yourselves and report to the muster deck immediately. Sturgis, step into the storeroom and break out the masks. Greene and Majinski, help him. Use the lift to bring them to the muster deck. Got it?"

Several strangling voices replied in order. Pritchard and Savage crowded into the lift with the rest of the men and went aloft.

"What do you think it is, son?" said Savage. Pritchard shrugged. "I don't know. What kind of thing or things could get through the ventilating system?"

The old man pursed his lips. "That's right. That's how we smelled it first. And then the blowers kicked off when all that compression backed up to them. You're right, Mr. Pritchard, whatever it is, it's still in the ducts."

The lift halted at the muster deck and the door slid open. "So here's what we'll do," said Pritchard as they stepped off. The old man heard him out and then nodded slowly, his rheumy eyes narrowing.

They waited while the men arrived, the whole ship's company of twenty cadet hunters (less McManus, now) and five crewmen. They all stood around eyeing Pritchard and the captain. The air was heavy with that lurking stench, but it was not too thick here to be unbreathable.

As soon as the gas mask detail had shoved the last of the cartons off the lift Pritchard started for the controls.

The muster deck was a heavily insulated circular chamber a bit forward from amidships.

The entire ship could be controlled from there. In emergencies it could be detached from the ship and used as a temporary space raft, having all necessary supplies in its padded wall lockers.

"First," announced Pritchard, "we're going to button this ship up tight." He reached for the ventilator switch and flicked it on.

Little motors all over the inner and outer hulls began wheeling shut the valves that closed the six-inch holes that were the ventilating system's intake and exhaust ports. In a matter of seconds the *Apollo* would stop breathing the wine-like night air of Thisbe II.

On the wall above the switch little green lights began to blink off one by one. As if gradually understanding his strategy, the men began to move up behind Pritchard, their eyes on the bank of fiery green points winking out.

The last little gem flickered, died, and then, strangely, flamed up again.

And, just as it went out for good, the entire muster deck gave a lurch. Feet scuffled, slipped, staggered. Here and there

a body thudded to the steel plates of the floor.

Pritchard's voice rose thundering above the abrupt commotion. "Grab hold! Something's got the ship—something—"

The muster deck swung in a wild circle, men sliding helplessly, caroming off the walls. Pritchard's flailing hand caught something and his long bony fingers laced about it in a grip of steel.

In benumbed fascination, he saw his body lengthen out, straining against that grip, appearing to levitate from the deck. The whole chamber tilted slowly until it seemed to hang below him. Men were slipping and falling down into the curved well of its farther wall, but some had grabbed out at holds here and there—a door-pull, or a stanchion, and dangled like Pritchard.

At the last instant he understood that the *Apollo* was falling. He had just time to pull himself up, to give his arm some play against the shock to come—

The great pointed cylinder struck with an awesome, deafening clangor—fell with a single bounce across its landing burn and settled to roll over approximately one-third its circumference.

Pritchard's grip, he discovered later, was to the handle of a locked chart drawer. The massive wrench of that impact straightened his arm with a jerk, but at the same time the drawer's lock broke. He fell away in a shower of sheet film just as the *Apollo* rolled, and a curve of smooth steel wall swung out to catch him and break his fall into a plunging glide against a cushion of stunned men's bodies.

It was a miracle that nobody was seriously injured. The slowness of the ship's fall at the outset, the curvature of walls, the general fitness of trained minds and bodies—all combined to prevent anything more serious than cuts and contusions.

Captain Savage was the first Pritchard pulled out of the tangle. The wiry old man was unhurt, though dazed. In spite of his age he gamely pulled himself together with a terrier-like shake.

"What hit us?" he croaked.

"I think whatever was in the ship did it," said Pritchard. "But then, that must mean it's outside now. Think we sustained much damage?"

The old man scoffed. "Man, this ship was built for crash landings. The surface glaze must be cracked. And all the supplies we broke out after landing must be all over hell."

He gazed aloft at the muster deck's controls, now high overhead. "Have to right her," he muttered, "but I can't get at them. I'll have to get to the master set, I guess." His gaze switched dubiously to the hatch leading to the nose, halfway up the curving wall. "I can set her back up on her tail, firing the beam tubes."

"Majinski," called out Pritchard, "build a ladder or pryamid of men up that hatch so the captain can get to the controls. Sturgis, you and you and you—" he picked out half a dozen cadet hunters—"let's scout through the ship. I want to be sure our friend has left."

It was awkward work, clambering over girders and through crazily slanting doors and along upside down passages where, in deep space, they floated past with ease. They held their snappers ready while Pritchard opened door after door with the captain's magnekey.

They found something in the compression chamber of Number Two Blower. What they found, after taking down the side panel, was a long, flopping red thing—something like a ten-foot carrot, writhing and curling in on itself wetly. It was a foot thick at its big end.

It fell out on the curving wall beneath the blower. They watched it soberly as it twisted this way and that convulsively, contracting and lengthening out. It gave off that same sickening odor.

"Is this what gave us all the trouble?" somebody demanded.

"No." Pritchard's nostrils flared slightly. "Just a part of it, that's all. Most of it got away."

"Most of it!"

He nodded slowly. "It was leaving when I started closing those ports. It was leaving by this intake port—maybe the way it came in—and the valve started to slice into it. In other words, we had it by the tail. It tried to yank free and that's what tipped us over."

"Y-y-you mean—?" They stared at him, refusing to credit the comprehension dawning in their minds.

"What else?" Pritchard's cheeks twitched in amusement.

"Hey, that's big!" said Sturgis softly.

"Quite big," murmured the tall hunter. "And quite intelligent if it came for McManus."

Their jaws dropped and their eyes protruded glassily.

"On the other hand," went on Pritchard musingly, "it might not be as smart as the person who sent it."

IV

THERE was flame in the night, blinding flame, and raucous, screeching thunder. And a great round of gleaming metal rising shudderingly on a cone of dazzling, roaring light. Rising to teeter at last on the tips of long, sweeping fins, teeter and rock and walk a bit on those blades of tempered nickel-steel, until the swaying tower ceased to gyrate sickeningly across the stars, its motion settling into a quickening, shortening arc that died away into a tremble, a vibration, a stillness.

Captain Savage took his gnarled and stubby fingers away from the firing manuals and sat down, drawing a sleeve across his sopping brows.

"Nice work," said Pritchard. "One push and no correction blasts. Thy hand hath not lost its skill."

The old man took a deep breath and grinned. "It's work for a younger man. Next time I'm going to let you do it. Or Sturgis."

"There won't be a next time," said Pritchard flatly.

The captain cocked a bright eye up at him. Pritchard gazed out a viewport. The horizon of Thisbe II lay like a worn hacksaw blade against the purple glow of Piramus, rising.

"Set watches," he said briefly. "The rest of the company can turn to for six hours. Then Sturgis, Greene, Kemp and I are going off in the jets."

"Fishing, I suppose?" said Savage with gentle irony.

Pritchard smiled coldly and shook his head. "No. Witch-hunting."

Two plump silvery beetles screamed through the thin stratosphere high above the

little planet. Behind them, dropping below the horizon, a needle stood gleaming in a black thumbprint. It was no longer possible to make out the smudge marring the *Apollo's* alabaster flank, much less the team now hanging in buckets from eyebolts high in the nose, chipping away the cracked and carbonized glaze—cracked by last night's fall and carbonized by the hell-fires of the righting operation.

In one beetle rode the wiry Sturgis and stocky Kemp. In the other, the rangy blond, Greene, handled the controls while Pritchard studied the face of *Thisbe II* rolling slowly under them.

"Got any ideas yet as to what hit us last night?" said Greene.

"Nope." After righting the ship, they'd turned on the floodlights, but neither then nor in the broad light of day was there any sign or trace of their visitor. A burial detail had laid McManus the traditional six feet into the crust of *Thisbe II*. The long red thing had flopped and tossed startlingly as they sank hooks into it and dragged it off into the grass.

"Must have been the tail of something big, huh? How come it got past the radar?"

Pritchard shrugged and continued to peer attentively ahead.

"Sure is a mighty pretty hunk of country," sighed the blond boy. "In places it reminds me of the stuff around the Cumberland Gap. If it weren't for that lavender sunlight, that is."

Pritchard didn't answer, his eyes steadily sweeping the terrain unfolding ahead.

"That was a hell of a thing happened to poor Tom last night," Greene went on. "Do you figure he had much pain before it finished him?"

Pritchard made no response.

"Tom was a right good boy, and a hard man to beat once he had the chance to get his feet under him. Remember the time big Hayes hit him?"

There was no answer. Greene sat relaxed, one foot on the rudder bar and an index finger curled indolently around the jet firing toggle.

"Boy, old Hayes let him have it before Tom was set. Just like you clipped him yesterday."

"I thought you'd say that." Pritchard's

voice was even. "You an' the rest of the boys used to be sure I don't forget that, don't you?"

"I wasn't meaning a thing, chief," complained the other. "Hell, we understand. Tom made a mistake and—and—well . . ."

"You can pass the word," said Pritchard softly, his eyes remaining hard on the vista ahead. "You can pass the word that I haven't forgotten the last thing Tom McManus had from me. Nor am I likely to—"

He grabbed the mike. "Cut, Sturgis, cut! Cut and glide—after me."

Greene, following instructions meant for him, too, snapped the jet toggle closed. The high-pitched thunder that had been chasing them across the sky was chopped off into utter silence.

"What you got?" he managed to say and then Pritchard's hip swung against him, neatly bowling him off the seat as the tall hunter thrust his feet toward the rudder bar.

"Stand by to fire," snapped Pritchard over his shoulder. The younger man lurched toward the rocket controls in the nose in front of Pritchard as the jet cruiser heeled silently over into a dive.

THE bowl of *Thisbe II* tilted up toward them and its features steadied in the face of that arrowing plunge. Dead ahead lay a meandering thread of river stitching up a wide, jungle-filled valley. At one point the river either split in two or broadened momentarily into a lake. At any rate, there was an island, right above the little flight-sight bead on the jet cruiser's prow.

The island swelled into detail. It was fairly large, for up from its center thrust one of those strange rock mountains, the three straight planes of its cleavage converging in a jagged, towering peak, making it seem an elongated triangular pyramid that had been driven forth at a slant and had then had its extreme tip snapped off. The primrose light of Pirus high above reflected now in a dazzling shimmer from one flank.

At its base, or at the base of one impossibly machine-smooth wall, there was a semi-circular mark, as if someone had carelessly strewn dirt across the olive-hued turf. The grains and clods of this dirt resolved themselves, as the jets whined on down, into

a twinkling, tumbling cluster of ants—with gnats hovering and darting. Then they became something larger.

Greene turned to shout excitedly at Pritchard, but at that instant Sturgis's voice cracked from the two-way mike Pritchard had hung above him.

"Hey, chief, aren't those some of that girl's animals?"

"Right," barked Pritchard, "That's a big rumpus down there. Follow me on down for a look. Then I think we'll try a couple of passes."

"Passes? At what?"

"Those are Miss Boyce's 'people', all right. They're fighting."

There was no further chance to talk. Pritchard and Sturgis gripped their separate toggles almost simultaneously and their jets roared into life, feeding power to their dives for a pull-out. The ground-contact alarm chattered its warning that they were coming too close.

As soon as the jets took hold, the pilots leaned back, pushing hard against the rudder bars. The tail elevators lifted into the slipstream, and the two silver beetles howled through a long pendulum swing that flung them far off into the sky.

But the trained eyes aboard them had ticked off the essential details of the amazing battle being waged through the tall grass toward the mountain.

"Holy rockets!" came from the blond head in front of Pritchard. "That's a regular battle line they're holding. Did you see those babies fighting!"

"Hey, chief," cracked Sturgis, "What goes on down there, anyway? Who's fighting whom? Or what's fighting which?"

Pritchard trimmed off into level flight before answering. "As far as I can make out, Cornelia Boyce's people are under attack, but I can't figure out who's doing the attacking. They're trying to hold that defense arc, but they're being snowed under. They're catching it from the air as well as on the ground. I recognize the animals inside that line. They're her people, all right. But I can't make out the attackers."

He banked the cruiser around toward that now miles-distant little spine of mountain.

Sturgis's ship followed him around as if fastened by a wire.

"They looked like reptiles and big insects."

"That's what they looked like to me. I don't remember seeing any of them yesterday—except for that bad dream I tried to shoot away from McManus."

"Anyway, there's sure a mob of them," cut in Sturgis. "The water all around that island is alive with them."

"That kid was right about one thing," said Pritchard. "There's a much higher level of intelligence here than you'd find in Teran animals, for instance. But never mind that now. Listen, boys, this is a planned and directed attack. And we're going to buy ourselves a stack of chips and sit in on the game. But, first, did anybody see the girl?"

"No," cracked the mike, and Greene shook his head.

"Well, I've got a hunch she's down there. She's mixed up in this somehow. I've a feeling a big battle like this is pretty unusual. This has all the earmarks of a war of extermination. And if those are her 'people' protecting her—something, or somebody, has her cornered."

"Could be," came Sturgis's voice. "But, then, who's this somebody or something?"

"I don't know. I don't care. This scrap's nothing to us. But we want the wench, boys. We want her on account of last night. And maybe for a couple of other reasons. She'd better come home for a little psychotherapy, for one thing. Now, here's our plan of attack . . ."

LIKE the pointer of a sundial, the jagged spear of mountain lay its deep blue shadow across the curve of battle, as if to mark off the dwindling hours and minutes of life for those who struggled, writhed and lay with glazing eyes in that long ribbony grass, now mashed and matted flat for acres in every direction, its pliant green-brown blades stained and mottled dark.

Red-eyed and snorting, the slate-gray boars stood shoulder to shoulder from one end of the arc to the other. As each one fell, the others closed ranks, shuffling backwards until their hides rubbed together again. Close behind them stood a thinning line of great scaled bears, clawing and biting what got past the boars. In and out among all their stiffly planted legs ran the lesser

carnivores and the canines, snapping and worrying at the things creeping through the grass. Behind, in the shrinking zone of defense, roved the six-legged bovines and equines, and the leaping ones, and the shaggy-maned gorillas, prancing, goring, trampling, crushing. Overhead circled and hovered a swarm of hawks and condors, plunging and tearing.

Against them came a nightmare horde. Those that could not fly or swim made clumsy rafts from odds and ends of vegetation and branches plundered from the jungle; some scurried across on swaying creepers, all along the banks.

Crawling, creeping things, reptilian and crustacean and multi-legged, undulating and gliding, disappearing into the grass to emerge at the last deadly moment. Scurrying, spiny things were there in force—scuttling over the mashed-flat grass in beady-eyed haste to be in at the kill. Above them flew skull-headed, mandible-snapping horrors, with membranous wings.

There were no tactics other than individual duel and the wearing down by sheer weight of numbers. Aloft, the winged ones met, clashed and fell, buzzing and flapping. Below, tusk and fang and claw and beak and hoof mandible rent and tore and worried and stung. The long, vicious lizards and the sudden-striking snakes kept coming through only to go down under churning, stamping hooves or be shredded by horns and claws and fangs.

Yet the battle was unequal. Slowly and wearily, the defenders gave before the superior numbers, the more skillful killing. The bodies they left dotting the meadow began to outnumber the crushed remains of the things they fought.

Deep in a cleft in the base of the mountain crouched a young Terran female. Every inch of her brown body shaking in helpless terror.

Cornelia Boyce's left hand gripped the handle of her long knife, still in its sheath. She would need it any time now.

For The One was coming for her at last. Why it had ordered Its people against hers, calling them with Its vicious mind from the far corners of this world, instead of coming for her directly, she didn't know. Perhaps It regarded her as the lesser ob-

jective and relegated the task of smashing her and her converts to this horde, while It moved against the ship. Perhaps It regarded the ship of the hunters with the same contempt It had had for the Survey ship and was moving against her first—and was using this battle to toy with her, show her death, as it were. Perhaps there was some other reason. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more, for this was the end.

It had tolerated her. For four of Thisbe II's years—not quite three Terran years—The One had left her alone, almost, it would seem, keeping out of her way. It was as if It realized that she, the only one of her kind to survive the debacle at the Survey camp, was essentially harmless. It had not minded her attempts to win over and tame and domesticate some of the people. After all, she had converted only the weaker and gentler of them with her synthetabs; she had gained control over only a small percentage of the killers, the lesser carnivores. No, she had never really threatened The One's dominance.

Pritchard was right. Now that her carefully woven veil of illusion was torn away, she knew that there were killers. Everywhere. Always had been. Killers, killers, killers . . .

The One proved that. It killed a hundred times a day. This world was Its preserve and It roamed and fed and slew as It chose, only occasionally for food. Perhaps this was the only reason for existence, in the last analysis—in a cruel Cosmos one lived only to be killer or killed.

It mattered not. This was the end. Angered by the advent of more of her kind, It had no doubt decided to wipe out both her and them, recognizing in them all a degree of intelligence which, in force, could threaten Its control. It would move against the ship, if indeed It had not already done so.

But It would certainly destroy her. This attack would have no other meaning.

But she would cheat It. The One could not move faster than her knife!

There was not much time now, and certainly no hope. The battle raging before her was mounting to its inevitable bloody climax.

Her people could not hold out much

longer. Their courage and faith and loyalty might not survive so terrible an ordeal. Were not some of the birds already winging away to distant refuge?

It was too bad. She would have liked to see the tall hunter once more before she . . . His eyes had been so piercing! She had forgotten what a man could be like. If only she had not been so balky yesterday!

But it was not to be. He had come, in one of those two jet cruisers, thundering across the killer-infested meadow, and he had gone. He had seen and not understood. Battles between alien beasts were of no concern to him. He might even return, to make cam-rec footage from aloft of this amazing battle.

Hope flashed. She could signal him! What could she use?

How could she catch a roving eye in a ten-mile-a-minute jet?

She tossed up her head, eyes suddenly narrowed.

Something came screaming around the mountain above her, followed by a second screaming something.

Then hell erupted beyond the battle line. Blast followed concussive blast, causing the big gorillas to cower and the other ones to charge about in helpless panic. Between the jarring blasts sounded the rippling crackle of dual-mounted automatic snappers.

The screams faded off into the sky. A stunned silence reigned along the battle perimeter. An acrid smoke drifted over the ground.

Then, just as groups were sporadically renewing their death-grips here and there, the twin screams sounded beyond the mountain again.

V

"TWO laps around the track and then to the showers!" yelled Greene, his fingers dancing over the rocket release and snapper buttons.

Leaning back against the rudder bar, Pritchard grinned. "You forget the passes along the river banks. They make it four laps."

Then he threw a quick glance over his shoulder, but he couldn't make much through the welter of rising dirt columns.

They came around the mountain in a tight curve. As they flattened for a run on the meadow they could see things scurrying for the water. The meadow itself was a churned and pitted mess. Bodies were thickly strewn everywhere.

"There she is!" yelled Sturgis. "You were right, chief. See her—over by the mountain?"

A tiny figure, mounted on a six-legged equine, was riding furiously back and forth. The defense arc was swelling outward, as her "people" rose to the offensive and began charging the demoralized attackers.

Then the two cruisers were racing through their run on the as yet unstrafed portion of the meadow furthest from the mountain. Sturgis's craft bucked as it rode the shock-waves from Greene's rocket blasts. As they shot in a wide curve around the other side of the mountain Pritchard said, "We'd better skip our last pass. Let's just sit down and work in close. I don't want her to get away."

They cut jets and floated in over the jungle, side-slipping to lose speed. With feather-light fingers at their controls, the cruisers skimmed the trampled meadow grass and touched down their wheels. As they rolled, Pritchard and Sturgis flung open cockpit windows and let bright fire from their flamers spew over the ground, while Green and Kemp sprayed right and left with their snappers.

Things struggled in the crisping, burning grass, crackling and roasting. Even as he turned the nozzle this way and that, Pritchard's face was a mask of disgust. All around the slowing ships, Cornelia's "people" galloped and raced with a vengeful, slaying lust.

"All out," said Pritchard. "Everybody take a flamer. We'll have to burn a path to the girl."

They climbed out and began walking toward the mountain four abreast, flame billowing ahead of them. There seemed to be only dead things in their path.

Then, suddenly, the girl was there, astride a magnificent six-legged equine type of animal, shaggy of coat and rather broad in the head. She had ridden around the wall of fire and her mount was trembling and shaking its head.

They turned off the flammers and stared up at her. Rumbling, whinnying sounds came from the equine's throat. She grunted and cooed back, as if soothing it. Then she turned her eyes on the men below.

"We wish to thank you." Her pale face was drawn and there was a suspicion of tears in her voice. "You came just in time."

She seemed small and absurdly girlish perched on that long back. Those inadequate strips of hide were still her only covering.

Pritchard nodded shortly. "If you'll be so good as to keep your be—people—out of our way, we'll sterilize this island. Just burn off all the cover and see to it there's none of them left. Why don't you herd your—uh—friends over onto what we've already—"

"That won't be necessary," she cut in. "They'll all be gone in another minute."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"The One is probably calling them off."

"The—what?"

She put her face in her hands. Pritchard frowned his puzzlement. How had so helpless a child managed to survive in a world like this?

"I'd like very much to know what this is all about, Miss Boyce," he said gently. "In fact, the reason we happened along is that we are looking for you. We thought you might be able to explain what happened last night."

As he told her, she lifted her face from her hands and her brimming eyes grew round. Before he had finished describing what they had found in the blower, she was shaking her head in despair.

"This is all your doing. This world was at peace until you came. Now The One is aroused. You see, it was The One that went into your ship—"

"The One?" A crispness came into his voice. "Miss Boyce, I think you'd better start at the beginning and give us a complete explanation. Just exactly what is this 'One' you keep talking about?"

SHE closed her eyes again. A slight shudder ran through her body and she shook her head dazedly.

"The One," she murmured, "is after us all now. It began by entering your ship. Then It sent Its people against mine—against me. It won't stop until It has de-

stroyed us all, and It—It's something I'd just as lief not describe.

"My people call it something which I have translated as 'The One'. To them, it means 'first', or 'leader', or something like that. It was in control of all the people here on Thisbe when the Survey arrived, and I'm afraid It still is. It wants to remain in control. You see, It's quite intelligent."

"I can believe that," Pritchard said. "It not only figured out how to get into the ship, but it also figured out how to find McManus."

"Oh, no, I don't believe it just went after him. Wasn't his cabin the nearest to the place it entered?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, it was."

"Oh, you don't understand The One as I do," she cried. "It would never be satisfied with just one. It came into your ship to feed on all of you. McManus was just the first person It found. From what you tell me, It wasn't even finished with him. There wouldn't be—anything—left . . ."

"Then why did It go away?"

"I couldn't tell you. Perhaps when your blower short-circuited, it arced a little. The One is very sensitive to fire. But It's not through. It will come back, one way or another."

"I think we can deal with it if it does," Pritchard smiled. "And it sent these unpleasant things at you? How can it do that?" He shot an appraising glance around the torn and bloody meadow with its mounds of dead and dying things.

When he turned back the girl was weeping. Sobs she could not suppress were shaking those nut-brown, rounded shoulders. "It has some kind of mental control," came her muffled voice. "Besides, they fear It dreadfully. Oh, my people, my poor people."

"Well, now, look," soothed Pritchard, "it's all over now. You'd better come back with us. I guess you've learned you can't make people out of all these animals. Besides, you've got an interesting story to tell the Board—"

"D-damn the B-B-Board," she said a little unsteadily. "Then you'll take me with you?"

Pritchard smiled his broadest smile. "But of course!"

"Then let's hurry," she pleaded. "We

have so little time."

"Why? What's the hurry?"

"The One! The One!" she burst out in sudden anxiety. "It'll come for us any minute, don't you understand?"

"Okay, okay," soothed Pritchard. He and the others were smiling at her excitement, when her equine suddenly reared so suddenly that she tumbled off. They started to her assistance, but she landed light as a cat on her feet. She stared wildly about her.

The equine uttered a growl and galloped off. The girl remained crouched, her eyes darting in every direction.

"Now what?" said Pritchard.

"The One," she breathed. "It's somewhere near. My sextuped would never have bolted like that otherwise."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," said Pritchard, taking her arm. "Come on—"

"Say, Mr. Pritchard, what's that thing over there?" Kemp pointed off to his left.

"Oh, God, no . . ." Cornelia's voice was a quavering moan.

Pritchard glanced where the stocky lad was pointing. What appeared to be an exceptionally tall and unusually red grass blade was wavering gently, as if bending to a mild breeze, about fifty yards off.

"Hell," muttered Sturgis, "that face is familiar."

Pritchard started walking toward it, the others following him. "Let's fan out a bit," he said, "until we see what this is."

"Come back, come back," came the girl's agonized whisper behind them. "Don't go near . . ."

They ignored her. At a distance of ten yards Pritchard halted. They all watched with consuming curiosity.

The slender red thing was growing. Or, rather, it was pouring out of the ground, crumbs of dirt sticking to its glistening scarlet wetness, its delicately tapering tip now some ten or twelve feet in the air.

Pritchard shifted the flamer tank on his shoulders and started to say, "I think—", when a maned gorilla loping across the meadow some hundred yards away gave a sudden scream and broke into a wild, shambling run in the other direction. Another animal gave bellowing voice, and another—and abruptly there was commotion, spread-

ing over the island toward the mountain.

Pritchard cleared his throat. "Get around it, boys. Let it keep coming, but when I say the word give it a lick of fire."

The waving red spire stood some fifteen feet high now. As he circled into his position with the others, he noticed two things simultaneously. Another little scarlet tip was questing up through the trampled grass close to the first one. And, out of the corner of his eye he could see the animals that were Cornelia's people streaming either way along the base of the mountain, in a frenzied rout to get to the river on the other side.

Then Cornelia's hands were clenching his arm, her voice panting hysterically in his ear. "Run, Pritchard! You don't know what you're up against. Oh, believe me," she sobbed, "please, please, please believe me. This is The One."

His eyes focusing on the growing scarlet tips—the second one had grown almost as high as the first—Pritchard smiled indulgently. "We're going to stay for the fun," he said. "What happened to all your friends? Stampeded, didn't they?"

She opened her mouth to reply but her answer was cut off by Greene's sudden scream.

Greene screamed as McManus had screamed last night. Screamed and sank writhing to his knees. Some kind of frothing slime was running down over his shoulders and chest, dissolving the acid-repellent cord-iron jacket, running down over Greene from what had been his head.

From between the bases of the now thick, tall red tongues, another jet of liquid squirted toward Sturgis. He leaped sideways and it missed him clean. "Holy Damn!" he shouted.

Pritchard gripped the flamer's trigger. "Give it hell!" he roared.

THREE streams of fire converged in a ball of flame on the twin red spires. They disappeared in the rippling, booming fire.

"Hold it!" Pritchard shut off his flamer and the others followed suit. Holding the nozzle before him, he walked to the place where the things had been.

There was nothing there, except a hole where the tangled grass had been disturbed, and a kind of pit in the ground, into which

loose dirt was still dribbling. He backed a step and turned the flamer on, playing fire into the pit and around it. Then he shut it off.

"You fool," came the girl's voice at his elbow. "You damned fool. You just won't believe me, will you?"

Pritchard lifted his gaze toward what had once been Cadet Greene, Richard Harrison Greene, a rollicking lad from the Cumberland Gap. Thomas Guilfoyle McManus, a man with a red-haired soul. McManus, first, and, now, Greene. The hunter's face was turned to stone.

"Keep your eyes peeled," he said harshly to the others and stalked off to the place where the squirt of liquid had landed after missing Sturgis. Some thirty feet from where it had been ejected, there was no grass but a four-foot smear where the ground bubbled and frothed. The stench hovering over this spot was incredible, even to the man who had encountered it before.

He turned to confront Cornelia who had followed him. "I don't know whether I can get it through your thick head or not," she bit out, "you've simply got to get out of here. You can't—"

"Get this through *your* thick head, Miss Boyce," said Pritchard between clenched teeth. "This thing, whatever it is, has killed two of my men. I'm quite ready to believe it is intelligent, possibly the most intelligent organism on this planet. But it's a killer just the same and we're going to kill it. None of your idealistic theories are going to stop us, either."

She stared at him, beginning to shake her head a little wildly. "You can't kill it! That's what I'm trying to tell you. It can't be k—"

There was a sudden crash. Cornelia whirled and screamed. The three men and the girl stood transfixed.

Over by the river one of the jet cruisers was on its side, resting on a crumpled wing. The other was forty feet in the air, and rising, held in the coil of an impossible red monstrosity rearing its long wet self into the sky.

It was a worm, a very long, thin worm at least a hundred feet long, not counting what remained underground. It towered some fifty feet into the air, about thirty-five feet more of it wrapped around the cruiser.

At its tip two fifteen-foot-long feelers writhed and wriggled, as if still smarting from the scorching they had received.

The coil slipped a little. The cruiser, looking more than ever like a beetle at this moment, slid slowly out and fell. And again it crashed into the cruiser on the ground and rolled ponderously off it.

"Good . . . God!" came Sturgis's voice shakily at Pritchard's elbow. The Chief Hunter was still too appalled to speak. He stared as the worm's rope-like body came curving down out of the sky, down to the cruisers again. Seeing how that red length alternately thinned to a one-foot thickness and swelled again to three feet and more as it oozed around the cruiser that had remained on the ground, he had a vision of how it had entered the *Apollo*, shrinking itself to a mere six-inch thread that poured through the intake port, seeping along the duct, swelling, bulging at McManus's air-grill . . . and coming out of the ground, probably close to the ship, it had evaded the radar field.

Cornelia's agonized face swam before his eyes. He felt his body shaking in the grip of her slender hands. Words—

"—fool, run! *Listen to me!* It's busy smashing your ships. We have a chance. Run—to the mountain! Oh, dear God . . ."

At first he was like a sleep-walker. They turned him around and pushed him into a stumbling run, but his head turned back, his eyes large and almost vacant on that scene by the river.

Then he was running. It was a good two hundred yards to the mountain, but the grass was mashed to a springy tangle under their feet and they had only to skirt the thickly-strewn bodies. The girl took the lead, the men not far in the rear, the nozzles of their flammers flapping out behind them.

A crash, followed by a dull roar, came to them. They shot quick glances over their shoulders. The fuel tanks of one of the cruisers had let go and fire was blooming from the now distant beetle. The worm was arching wildly away, and then sinking in a curve to the ground.

"How fast—can it go—on the—surface?" panted Pritchard.

"Much faster—than under—ground!" Cornelia muttered:

VI

SHE was leading the way to the thin, rough ridge that marched up the mountain between two of its smooth planes of fracture. She sprang to the ridge and began running lightly up it. At twenty feet she stopped.

The men were slower. The ridge was nothing but saw-toothed points of raw rock, hard and glassy and glittering. They had not had the girl's practice with it.

She motioned Kemp past her and called down to Pritchard. "This is our only hope. I've never seen The One on any of these mountains. I'm sure It can't climb the smooth sides—"

"And we can hold It back with our flammers. Good girl."

"But hadn't we better get a little higher?" queried Sturgis.

"Higher!" echoed the girl. "We've got to get to the top!"

Frantically, they climbed, taking insane chances, fantastically insecure holds, scrambling, cutting their hands on the raw rock edges, living a nightmare . . .

At last Kemp and Cornelia, weak with exhaustion, sank against the ridge, gasping and heaving. Sturgis, next in line, had no breath with which to berate them. He could only crouch there and stare helplessly at them both.

Pritchard braced his feet and dared to look down. The One was a straight red line across the meadow, a gleam of highlight from Its wet side where the afternoon sun struck It. (Unconsciously he thought of It now as Cornelia did, as a person.) It was heading for the foot of the ridge.

They all stared down, sucking in their tortured breaths. Waiting for It to reach the ridge and start climbing, Pritchard found himself studying It detachedly. He realized his courage and reason were somehow reviving.

It was, after all, a worm. It differed from a six-inch Terran night-crawler only in that It measured about a hundred and fifty feet in length, and was proportionately much thinner, like a snake. It also differed in those snail-like tips that probed out into slim, delicate points or contracted into thick stubs scarce six feet long. Those tips were inves-

tigating the jagged rock of the ridge now.

And he saw that there were tips at the other end, too. But one was missing. Only a round stump accompanied the other long trailing feeler. It was a fair index of The One's terrible strength, Pritchard thought—realizing where the rest of that tip was now—that, in trying to wrench Itself clear, It had knocked over a hundred-foot, five-thousand-ton space ship.

"It's coming," said Kemp in a shrill, brittle voice. The hunter shot a glance at the stocky youth and saw he was fighting hysteria.

The One was rippling slowly up the ridge. Pritchard guessed Its speed was greater than it seemed at that distance. Like a scarlet river, It poured steadily up.

"After I've used this," said Cornelia in an even, conversational voice, "you gentlemen can have it if you don't mind having to pull it out of me." She held up her long knife, and there was no expression on her face.

Kemp and Sturgis could only stare at her. Pritchard couldn't warn her by asking them to take it away from her, and anyway this was no place for a wrestle.

"And why do you think we would want that?" he asked in as pleasant a tone as he could manage.

"So much better than a flamer or jumping," she replied. "Take my advice and—"

"I wish you would pull yourself together," said Pritchard. "You're frightening Kemp up there."

Startled, Kemp stared back down at his chief, and then he closed his mouth in a firm line. Pritchard congratulated himself that the remark was a stone that had slain two birds.

"You don't honestly think there's a way out of this," exclaimed Cornelia, "with—"

"What I wouldn't give for my snapper!" breathed Kemp.

"Or one of those five-inchers," and Sturgis jerked his head at the little tumbled beetles over at the river.

"There isn't a rocket tube down there I'd trust now," said Pritchard. "They're all bunged out of alignment. Some of the snappers might still be in shape to use . . ." His voice trailed off. Something was taking

shape in his thoughts, something revolving about a word Cornelia had uttered—the word “jump.”

“Well, what *can* we do?” muttered Sturgis tensely. The worm was still well below, but coming steadily up. They could see the little scarlet tips now, questing over the jagged edges. Behind was all humping redness.

“We were very foolish—” Pritchard checked himself. “I was very foolish. I permitted us to be outmaneuvered. The one thing that monster doesn’t want is for one of us to get back to the cruisers—”

“I’ve been thinking,” Sturgis cut in. “Why don’t we empty all our flamer tanks along the ridge here, climb all the way to the top and then, as soon as it’s almost there, spark the fuel and give it a good roasting?”

Pritchard shook his head. “I thought of that. You forget how volatile that stuff is. By the time it gets there—no, I’ve got a better use for the flamers.”

He began unstrapping the tank from his shoulders. “Kemp, pass yours on down. No, hang on to it, just in case. Sturgis, you take my position and hold it off as long as you can—” He glanced at the gauge on the light plastic tank and shook his head grimly. “Okay, children, let’s get going—to the top.”

The mountain wasn’t really much of a mountain, being only some five hundred feet high. Their first frantic scramble up the ridge had carried them almost two-thirds of the way.

Behind them, the worm was flowing steadily upward, like a river of blood, along the narrow ridge.

“Kemp,” panted Pritchard as the short young man finally and painfully inched over the knife-edged peak.

Kemp turned, stretching out a hand to Cornelia to help her up and over. “Yes?”

“I’m putting this girl in your charge. She’s your responsibility—”

“What are you going to do?” put in Cornelia quickly.

Pritchard looked up into those gray-green eyes so intent upon him. A pang of regret stabbed through him. He was no longer seeing her sweet-lined body. Here was a girl he could have ridden the starways with. A person with enough courage and resource

to have held her own in this killer-infested Eden.

“I’m taking a powder, as they used to say back on good old Terra. I’m gambling. Gambling that I can get back to the one cruiser that hasn’t burnt up all its wiring, and call the ship.” He slapped the leg-pocket of his breeches. Kemp nodded. The pocket contained a ready-packed emergency chute.

CORNELIA shook her head slowly. “You’ll never make it—”

“He might,” said Kemp.

“I’ll bet I can,” said Pritchard. “I’ve got to.”

“The One will get you,” she said. “It can get into one of those things easily. It’ll take only a little of Its digestive juice . . .” Her face puckered and those emerald eyes shone brighter, but she fought for and regained control.

“So?” Pritchard smiled. “You’ll be well rid, then, of that notorious big game hunter, Elmer Pritchard.”

“I don’t want to be rid of him,” she said softly. “I want him with me—at the end.”

He bowed. “Thank you, Miss Boyce.”

“Call me Cornelia, please.”

“And you,” he said, “may call me Elmer—a name I permit no one to use—” he bent forward “—but you, now.”

Their lips brushed and clung.

“Fine time for love-making,” muttered Kemp.

Below them, a flamer squealed suddenly. Sturgis, unknown to them, had lingered behind. Now, a hundred feet down the ridge, he fired a burst at the worm—a warning burst, for the dread feelers hung high above his head on a long, curving tendon of red wetness.

The flamer had an effective range of only thirty feet, but the slimy scarlet rope curved away, dropping off to one side and extending out into the air. The feelers contracted to mere knobs and the end thickened into a club.

A haymaker, drawing back, poised and cocked. Pritchard saw it and howled, “Sturgis! Duck!”

But there was to be no ducking that swing. Sturgis hugged the thin spine of crag and threw up a blossom of fire. But the rope came flailing about, slashing through the

flame, and neatly flicked him off.

They watched the body arcing out over the meadow, the spare flamer of Pritchard twisting after it, and saw it sink on down, to stop suddenly against the turf.

Kemp began to curse. Pritchard pulled the emergency chute pack from his leg-pocket and began snapping the light harness about his long frame.

"Cut that out," he said coldly. "Just hang on, Kemp, and watch. If I've got this baby figured out right, It's going to lose interest in you two in about as many seconds."

"Good-bye, Elmer," came Cornelia's voice forlornly.

The worm's first half was recovering from the follow-through of that swing, draping itself back along the ridge yard by relentless yard. Pritchard turned, holding the chute cord in his fist. He forced a grin that he was afraid looked more like a grimace. "So long, kiddies," he said, and jumped.

At this point the leaning peak overhung the ground and he flung himself as far out as possible, trying for distance. The smooth, almost polished wall slanted away from him and the meadow swung upward.

He pulled the cord at the last minute. As the filmy neosilk billowed above him, and the harness seemed to jerk him back up from the onrushing ground, he managed to twist a glance back up at the ridge.

The One was motionless. That was good.

It had seen him.

Then he drew up his knees. The ground slammed into him and he lay there, stunned, letting the filmy folds flutter down over him.

Then he was up, bruised but whole, on his knees and scrabbling out from under the light gray stuff. By crawling under every line he avoided entanglement and in a minute was clear and running, unsnapping the harness as he went.

Not until he was well away from the mountain did he dare a glance over his shoulder. Then he almost stumbled, at the chill terror gusting through him, freezing every muscle.

The worm was a red festoon, drooping from the ridge. Even as he looked, Its whole length came off, to fall writhing out of sight momentarily at the base of the mountain.

He hadn't expected that. He had planned

for It to back laboriously down the way It came, giving him a decent margin of time. But it had crossed him up. Now he had seconds instead of minutes.

He put his head down and dug in, pumping his tired, aching legs furiously. This was the worst gamble of his career, against the longest odds. He had no idea how fast the worm could go on level ground.

Suddenly, he was racing a shadow. In the slanting light of Piramus, setting through the afternoon, something like an elongated caricature of a snail's head crept across the grass beside him—two long slivers of tapering purple shadow.

Then he saw his flamer, lying almost dead ahead where it had landed after being catapulted off the ridge. Sobs rasping his throat, he slanted toward it, dove and rolled, to come up clutching it.

There was a spattering sound close by, a spatter that changed to an angry fizzing. Pritchard swung the nozzle up in the very face of the glistening red column swaying toward him. He squeezed the handle-grip.

Through the booming flame, he saw the shape twisting aside and followed it with fire. It went down to the ground, backing away into a swelling body. The worm writhed desperately away from that searing plume of licking flames.

Pritchard wheeled and ran toward the cruiser that had not burned.

Evil-smelling juice slashed across the up-turned belly of the ship as he savagely wrenched open the buckled door and tumbled in, dragging the flamer in after him. He stumbled across the roof-struts and lunged for the upside-down radio panel.

The cruisers' radios were on their own battery-powered circuits. He snapped the power on and heard the slow hum and sputter of the warming tubes. He poked in the button labeled AUT. EM. SIG. a standard repeating distress call on a tight beam.

Then he was flung against the opposite wall. As he struggled back to his feet, pressure against them told him the cruiser was rising, and he knew very well it was not doing so under its own power.

A glistening red wall bulged against the door-frame through which he had come. Pritchard realized that once again the cruiser was being hoisted aloft in the worm's

coil. It was going to drop him, to kill him quickly, rather than poke inside and face his flamer.

Pritchard snatched the flamer and staggered toward the opening. Jabbing the nozzle into that scarlet slime, he gripped the handles.

ROARING heat beat back at him. He braced himself, ignoring his own searing flesh and crisping hair.

The cruiser struck ground with a crash. He was flung sideways, threw up an arm, and heard it snap. He dragged himself to the door which now was turned to the ground. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Pritchard hung his head through the opening and peered out.

It was a crazy nightmare. The meadow was a ceiling, to his inverted eyes, against which a giant red riband rolled and writhed in fantastic configurations. Every melting convolution, every arching loop, expressed pain and wrath. And, now and again, a livid blotch appeared along its length, alternately turning purple and yellow, and dripping streamers of drool.

Then came a sound, a great tearing sound in the sky. Pritchard hauled himself back into the ship and crawled to the radio. He switched off the automatic signal and cut in the transmission band.

"—the hell you got down there?" came Captain Savage's rasp. "Is that you up on the rock, Mr. Pritchard? Mr. Pritchard—"

"Captain!" yelled Pritchard. "Step on it! Come down on that monster. I'm all right. Come ahead!"

Then he snatched up a pair of solar goggles and worked his way to a viewpoint, in time to see the *Apollo*, a magnificent column of metal in the sky, descend on a pillar of incandescence—at the bottom of which lay something that bubbled and cooked, rising in a last great arch of simmering agony.

The snaggle-toothed horizon of Thisbe II was rising across the dull indigo disk of setting Piramus. Pritchard and Savage sat in their gimbal chairs in the Forward Lounge. The old man's wispy white hairs stirred in the evening breeze sucked in by the blowers.

"And every time I wonder if my hunting days aren't over," sighed Pritchard. Experimentally, he worked on the flexicast on his right arm.

"Huh," grunted the captain. "Not you. One week on Terra and you'll be telling yourself the next time it just can't be as bad. Or that this wasn't as bad as it seemed. Anything, you'll tell yourself. Anything to start—"

Cornelia appeared in the doorway. "Good evening, gentlemen," she said coolly. She was wearing cordon slacks and a soft neosilk blouse, that seemed to enjoy clinging to her contours.

"Good evening," croaked Captain Savage. He stood up, and stretched restlessly.

"Oh, don't go," said Cornelia.

"Well, if we're blasting off in the morning, I've got things to do. These days it's the old men who do all the work." He chuckled as he eased past her through the door, and gave her shoulder a little pat. "Good hunting."

The girl watched him go down the passage. "Whatever did he mean by that?" she inquired. "'Good hunting'."

"Oh, it's just an expression," said Pritchard vaguely.

She came over to him and turned about on her bare feet. "No shoes that fit," she said. "How do you like what I managed to scrounge from the men?"

He pulled her down to him with one lazy reach of his good arm. "I'm afraid," he murmured, "that I liked you better the way you were."

"You know," she spoke muffledly against his shoulder, "you're something of a beast."

A PLANET NAMED JOE

By S. A. LOMBINO

There were more Joes on Venus than you could shake a ray-gun at. Perhaps there was method in Colonel Walsh's madness—murder-madness—when he ordered Major Polk to scan the planet for a guy named Joe.

COLONEL WALSH had a great sense of humor. I hated his guts ever since we went through the Academy together, but he had a great sense of humor.

For example, he could have chosen a Second Looie for the job on Venus. He might even have picked a Captain. But he

liked me about as much as I liked him, and so he decided the job was just right for a Major. At least, that's what he told me.

I stood at attention before his desk in the Patrol Station. We were somewhere in Area Two on Earth, takeoff point for any operations in Space II. The duty was fine, and I



liked it a lot. Come to think of it, the most I ever did was inspect a few defective tubes every now and then. The rest was gravy, and Colonel Walsh wasn't going to let me get by with gravy.

"It will be a simple assignment, Major," he said to me, peering over his fingers. He held them up in front of him like a cathedral.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"It will involve finding one man, a Venusian native."

I wanted to say, "Then why the hell don't you send a green kid on the job? Why me?" Instead, I nodded and watched him playing with his fingers.

"The man is a trader of sorts. Rather intelligent." He paused, then added, "For a native, that is."

I had never liked Walsh's attitude toward natives. I hadn't liked the way he'd treated the natives on Mars ever since he'd taken over there. Which brought to mind an important point.

"I always figured Venus was under the jurisdiction of Space III, sir. I thought our activities were confined to Mars."

He folded his fingers like a deck of cards and dropped them on his desk as if he were waiting for me to cut.

"Mmmm," he said, "yes, that's true. But this is a special job. It so happens this Venusian is the one man who can help us understand just what's happening on Mars."

I tried to picture a Venusian understanding Mars and I didn't get very far.

"He's had many dealings with the natives there," Walsh explained. "If anyone can tell us the reasons for the revolt, he can."

If Walsh really wanted to know the reasons for the revolt, I could give them to him in one word: Walsh. I had to laugh at the way he called it "revolt." It had been going on for six months now and we'd lost at least a thousand men from Space II. Revolt.

"And this man is on Venus now?" I asked for confirmation. I'd never been to Venus, being in Space II ever since I'd left the Moon run. It was just like Walsh to ship me off to a strange place.

"Yes, Major," he said. "This man is on Venus."

At the Academy he had called me Fred.

That was before I'd reported him for sleeping on Boiler Watch. He'd goofed off on a pile of uranium that could've, and almost did, blow the barracks sky-high that night. He still thought it was my fault, as if I'd done the wrong thing by reporting him. And now, through the fouled-up machinery that exists in any military organization, he outranked me.

"And the man's name, sir?"

"Joe." A tight smile played on his face.

"Joe what?" I asked.

"Just Joe."

"Just Joe?"

"Yes," Walsh said. "A native, you know. They rarely go in for more than first names. But then, it should be simple to find a man with a name like Joe. Among the natives, I mean."

"I don't know, sir."

"A relatively simple assignment," Walsh said.

"Can you tell me anything else about this man? Physical appearance? Personal habits? Anything?"

Walsh seemed to consider this for a moment. "Well, physically he's like any of the other Venusians, so I can't give you much help there. He does have a peculiar habit, though."

"What's that?"

"He has an affinity for Terran cigarettes."

I sighed. "Well, it's not very much to go on."

"You'll find him," Walsh said, grinning. "I'm sure of it."

THE trip to Venus came off without a hitch. I did a lot of thinking on that trip. I thought about Mars and the revolt there. And I thought about Colonel Leonard Walsh and how he was supposed to be quelling that revolt. Ever since Walsh had taken command, ever since he'd started pushing the natives around, there'd been trouble. It was almost as if the whole damned planet had blown up in our faces the moment he took over. Swell guy, Walsh.

Venus was hotter than I'd expected it to be. Much too hot for the tunic I was wearing. It smelled, too. A funny smell I couldn't place. Like a mixture of old shoe and after-shave. There were plants everywhere I looked. Big plants and small ones,

some blooming with flowers I'd never seen before, and some as bare as cactus.

I recognized a blue figure as one of the natives the pilot had told me about. He was tall, looking almost human except that everything about him was elongated. His features, his muscles, everything seemed to have been stretched like a rubber band. I kept expecting him to pop back to normal. Instead, he flashed a double row of brilliant teeth at me.

I wondered if he spoke English. "Hey, boy," I called.

He ambled over with long-legged strides that closed the distance between us in seconds.

"Call me Joe," he said.

I dropped my bags and stared at him. Maybe this *was* going to be a simple assignment after all. "I sure am glad to see you, Joe," I said.

"Same here, Toots," he answered.

"The guys back in Space II are searching high and low for you," I told him.

"You've got the wrong number," he said, and I was a little surprised at his use of Terran idiom.

"You are Joe, aren't you? Joe the trader?"

"I'm Joe, all right," he said. "Only thing I ever traded, though, was a pocketknife. Got a set of keys for it."

"Oh," I said, my voice conveying my disappointment. I sighed and began wondering just how I should go about contacting the Joe I was looking for. My orders said I was to report to Captain Bransten immediately upon arrival. I figured the hell with Captain Bransten. I outranked him anyway, and there wasn't much he could do if I decided to stop for a drink first.

"Where's the Officer's Club?" I asked the Venusian.

"Are you buying information or are you just curious?"

"Can you take me there?" I asked.

"Sure thing, Toots." He picked up my bags and started walking up a heavily overgrown path. We'd probably walked for about ten minutes when he dropped my bags and said, "There it is."

The Officer's Club was a plasteel hut with window shields that protected it from the heat of the sun. It didn't look too comfortable but I really wanted that drink. I

reached into my tunic and slipped the native thirty solars.

He stared at the credits curiously and then shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, you're new here. We'll let it go."

He took off then, while I stared after him, wondering just what he'd meant. Had I tipped him too little?

I shrugged and looked over at the Officer's Club. From the outside it looked as hot as hell.

On the inside it was about two degrees short of that mark. I began to curse Walsh for taking me away from my nice soft job in Space II.

There wasn't much inside the club. A few tables and chairs, a dart game and a bar. Behind the bar a tall Venusian lounged.

I walked over and asked, "What are you serving, pal?"

"Call me Joe," he answered.

He caught me off balance. "What?"

"Joe," he said again.

A faint glimmer of understanding began to penetrate my thick skull. "You wouldn't happen to be Joe the trader? The guy who knows all about Mars, would you?"

"I never left home," he said simply.

"What are you drinking?"

That rat! That dirty, filthy, stinking, unprincipled . . .

But then, it should be simple to find a man with a name like Joe. Among the natives, I mean.

Sure. Oh sure. Real simple. Walsh was about the lowest, most contemptible . . .

"What are you drinking, pal?" the Venusian asked again.

"Skip it," I said. "How do I get to the captain's shack?"

"Follow your nose, pal. Can't miss it."

I started to pick up my bag as another Venusian entered. He waved at the bartender.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "How's it going?"

"Not so hot, Joe," the bartender replied.

I listened in fascination. Joe, Joe, Joe. So this was Walsh's idea of a great gag. Very funny. Very . . .

"You Major Polk, sweetheart?" the Venusian who'd just come in asked.

"Yes," I said, still thinking of Colonel Walsh.

"You better get your butt over to the

captain's shack," he said. "He's about ready to post you as overdue."

"Sure," I said wearily. "Will you take my bags, please?"

"Roger," he answered. He picked up the bags and nodded at the bar.

"So long, Joe," he said to the bartender.

"See you, Joe," the bartender called back.

CAPTAIN BRANSTEN was a mousey, unimpressive sort of man. He was wearing a tropical tunic, but he still resembled a wilted lily more than he did an officer.

"Have a seat, Major," he offered. He reached for a cigarette box on the desk and extended it to me. He coughed in embarrassment when he saw it was empty. Quickly, he pressed a button on his desk and the door popped open. A tall, blue Venusian stepped lithely into the room.

"Sir?" the Venusian asked.

"We're out of cigarettes, Joe," the Captain said. "Will you get us some, please?"

"Sure thing," the Venusian answered. He smiled broadly and closed the door behind him.

Another Joe, I thought. Another damned Joe.

"They steal them," Captain Bransten said abruptly.

"Steal what?" I asked.

"Cigarettes. I sometimes think the cigarette is one of the few things they like about Terran culture."

So Walsh had taken care of that angle too. *He does have a peculiar habit, though. He has an affinity for Terran cigarettes.* Cigarettes was the tip I should have given; not solars.

"All right," I said, "suppose we start at the beginning."

Captain Bransten opened his eyes wide. "Sir?" he asked.

"What's with all this Joe business? It may be a very original name but I think its popularity here is a little outstanding."

Captain Bransten began to chuckle softly. I personally didn't think it was so funny. I tossed him my withering Superior Officer's gaze and waited for his explanation.

"I hadn't realized this was your first time on Venus," he said.

"Is there a local hero named Joe?" I

asked.

"No, no, nothing like that," he assured me. "It's a simple culture, you know. Not nearly as developed as Mars."

"I can see that," I said bitingly.

"And the natives are only now becoming acquainted with Terran culture. Lots of enlisted men, you know."

I began to get the idea. And I began to appreciate Walsh's doubtful ancestry more keenly.

"It's impossible to tell exactly where it all started, of course," Bransten was saying.

I was beginning to get angry. Very angry. I was thinking of Walsh sitting back in a nice cozy foam chair back on Earth.

"Get to the point, Captain!" I barked.

"Easy, sir," Bransten said, turning pale. I could see that the Captain wasn't used to entertaining Majors. "The enlisted men. You know how they are. They'll ask a native to do something and they'll call him Joe. 'Hey, Joe, give me a hand with this.' Or 'Listen, Joe, how'd you like to earn some cigarettes?' Do you follow?"

"I follow, all right," I said bitterly.

"Well," Bransten went on, "that sort of thing mushrooms. The natives are a simple, almost childish people. It appealed to them—the Joe business, I mean. Now they're all Joe. They like it. That and the cigarettes."

He cleared his throat and looked at me apologetically as if he were personally responsible for Venusian culture. In fact, he looked as if he were responsible for having put Venus in the heavens in the first place.

"Do you understand, Major? Just a case of extended idiom, that's all."

Just a case of extended *idiot*, I thought. An idiot on a wild goose chase a hell of a long way from home.

"I understand perfectly," I snapped. "Where are my quarters?"

Bransten asked a Venusian named Joe to show me my quarters, reminding me that chow was at thirteen hundred. As I was leaving, the first Venusian came back with the cigarettes Bransten had ordered.

I could tell by the look on his face that he probably had half a carton stuffed into his pockets. I shrugged and went to change into a tropical tunic.

I called Earth right after chow. The Captain assured me that this sort of

thing was definitely against regulations, but he submitted when I twinkled my little gold leaf under his nose.

Walsh's face appeared on the screen. He was smiling, looking like a fat pussy cat.

"What is it, Major?" he asked.

"This man Joe," I said. "Can you give me any more on him?"

Walsh's grin grew wider. "Why, Major," he said, "you're not having any difficulties, are you?"

"None at all," I snapped back. "I just thought I'd be able to find him a lot sooner if . . ."

"Take your time, Major," Walsh beamed. "There's no rush at all."

"I thought . . ."

"I'm sure you can do the job," Walsh cut in. "I wouldn't have sent you otherwise."

Hell, I was through kidding around. "Look . . ."

"He's somewhere in the jungle, you know," Walsh said.

I wanted to ram my fist into the screen, right smack up against those big white teeth. Instead, I cut off the transmission and watched the surprised look on his face as his screen went blank millions of miles away.

He blinked at the screen, trying to realize I'd deliberately hung up on him.

"Polk!" he shouted, "can you hear me?"

I smiled, saw the twisted hatred on his features, and then the screen on my end went blank, too.

He's somewhere in the jungle, you know.

I thanked Captain Bransten for his hospitality and went back to my quarters.

As I saw it, there were two courses for me to follow.

One: I could say the hell with Walsh and Venus. That would mean hopping the next ship back to Earth.

It would also mean disobeying the direct order of a superior officer. It might mean demotion, and it might mean getting bounced out of the Service altogether.

Two: I could assume there really was a guy named Joe somewhere in that jungle, a Joe separate and apart from the other Joes on this planet, a trader Joe who knew the Martians well. I could always admit failure, of course, and return empty handed. Mission not accomplished. Or, I might really find a

guy who was trader Joe.

I made my decision quickly. I wanted to stay in the Service, and besides Walsh may have been on the level for the first time in his life. Maybe there was a Joe here who could help us on Mars. If there was I'd try to find him. It was still a hell of a trick though.

I cursed Walsh again and pushed the buzzer near my bed.

A tall Venusian stepped into the room.

"Joe?" I asked, just to be sure.

"Who else, boss?" he answered.

"I'm trying to locate someone," I said. "I'll need a guide to take me into the jungle. Can you get me one?"

"It'll cost you, boss," the Venusian said.

"How much?"

"Two cartons of cigarettes at least."

"Who's the guide?" I asked.

"How's the price sound?"

"Fine, fine," I said impatiently. And the Captain had said they were almost a childish people!

"His name is Joe," the Venusian told me. "Best damn guide on the planet. Take you anywhere you want to go, do anything you want to do. Courageous. Doesn't know the meaning of fear. I've known him to . . ."

"Skip it," I said, cutting the promotion short. "Tell him to show up around fifteen hundred with a complete list of what we'll need."

The Venusian started to leave.

"And Joe," I said, stopping him at the door, "I hope you're not overlooking your commission on the deal."

His face broke into a wide grin. "No danger of that, boss," he said.

When he was gone I began figuring out a plan of action. Obviously, I'd just have to traipse through the jungle looking for a guy named Joe on a planet where everyone was named Joe. Everybody, at least, but the Captain, the small garrison attached to the Station, and me.

I BEGAN wondering why Walsh had gone to so much trouble to get rid of me. The job, as I saw it, would take a hell of a long time. It seemed like a silly thing to do, just to get even with a guy for something that had happened years ago. He

surely must have realized that I'd be back again, sooner or later. Maybe he had another little junket all set for me.

Or maybe he didn't expect me to come back.

The thought hadn't occurred to me before this, and I began to consider it seriously. Walsh was no good, rotten clear through. He was failing at the job of keeping Mars in hand, and he probably realized that a few more mistakes on his part would mean the end of his career with Space II. I chuckled as I thought of him isolated in some God-forsaken place like Space V or Space VII. This probably bothered him a lot, too. But what probably bothered him more was the fact that I was next in command. If he were transferred, I'd be in charge of Space II, and I could understand how much that would appeal to Walsh.

I tried to figure the thing out sensibly, tried to weigh his good points against his bad. But it all came back to the same thing. A guy who would deliberately go to sleep on Boiler Watch with a ton of uranium ready to blast a barracks to smithereens if it wasn't watched, would deliberately do just about anything.

Sending me off on a wild goose chase after a character named Joe may have been a gag. But it may have been something a little grimmer than a gag, and I made up my mind to be extremely careful from here on in.

The guide arrived at fifteen hundred on the dot. He was tall, elongated, looked almost like all the other Venusians I'd seen so far.

"I understand you need a Grade A guide, sir," he said.

"Are you familiar with the jungle?" I asked him.

"Born and raised there, sir. Know it like the back of my hand."

"Has Joe told you what the payment will be?"

"Yes, sir. A carton and a half of cigarettes."

I thought about Joe deducting his commission and smiled.

"When can we leave?"

"Right away, sir. We won't need much really. I've made a list of supplies and I can get them in less than an hour. I suggest

you wear light clothing, boots, and a hat."

"Will I need a weapon?"

He looked at me, his eyes faintly amused.

"Why, what for, sir?"

"Never mind," I said. "What's your name, by the way?"

He lifted his eyebrows, and his eyes widened in his narrow face. He was definitely surprised.

"Joe," he said. "Didn't you know?"

WHEN we'd been out for a while I discovered why Joe had suggested the boots and the hat. The undergrowth was often sharp and jagged and it would have sliced my legs to ribbons were they not protected by the high boots. The hat kept the strong sun off my head.

Joe was an excellent guide and a pleasant companion. He seemed to be enjoying a great romp, seemed to love the jungle and take a secret pleasure in the work he was doing. There were times when I couldn't see three feet ahead of me. He'd stand stock still for a few minutes, his head barely moving, his eyes darting from one plant to another. Then he'd say, "This way," and take off into what looked like more impenetrable jungle invariably to find a little path leading directly to another village.

Each village was the same. The natives would come running out of their huts, tall and blue, shouting, "Cigarettes, Joe? Cigarettes?" It took me a while to realize they were addressing me and not my guide.

Everybody was Joe. It was one beautiful, happy, joyous round of stinking, hot jungle. And I wasn't getting any nearer my man. Nor had I any idea how I was supposed to find him. I began to feel pretty low about the whole affair.

Joe, on the other hand, enjoyed every moment of the trip. In each village he greeted the natives cheerfully, told them stories, swapped gossip and jokes. And when it was time to leave, he would say goodbye to all his friends and we would plunge into the twisted foliage again.

His spirits were always high and he never failed to say the right thing that would give a momentary lift to my own depressed state of mind. He would talk for hours on end as we hacked our way through the jungle.

"I like Venus," he said once. "I would never leave it."

"Have you ever been to Earth?" I asked.

"No," Joe replied. "I like Terrans too, you understand. They are good for Venus. And they are fun."

"Fun?" I asked, thinking of a particular species of Terran: species Leonard Walsh.

"Yes, yes," he said wholeheartedly.

"They joke and they laugh and . . . well, you know."

"I suppose so," I admitted.

Joe smiled secretly, and we pushed on. I began to find, more and more, that I had started to talk freely to Joe. In the beginning he had been just my guide. There had been the strained relationship of employer and employee. But as the days lengthened into weeks, the formal atmosphere began to crumble. I found myself telling him all about Earth, about the people there, about my decision to attend the Academy, the rigid tests, the grind, even the Moon run. Joe was a good listener, nodding sympathetically, finding experiences in his own life to parallel my own.

And as our relationship progressed from a casual one to a definitely friendly one, Joe seemed more enthusiastic than ever to keep up our grinding pace to find what we were looking for.

Once we stopped in a clearing to rest. Joe lounged on the matted greenery, his long body stretched out in front of him, the knife gleaming in his belt. I'd seen him slash his way through thick, tangled vines with that knife, his long, muscular arms powerfully slicing through them like strips of silk.

"How far are we from the Station?" I asked.

"Three or four Earth weeks," he replied.

I sighed wearily. "Where do we go from here?"

"There are more villages," he said.

"We'll never find him."

"Possibly," Joe mused, the smile creeping over his face again.

"A wild goose chase. A fool's errand."

"We'd better get started," Joe said simply.

I got to my feet and we started the march again. Joe was still fresh, a brilliant contrast to me, weary and dejected. Somehow, I had

the same feeling I'd had a long time ago on my sixteenth birthday. One of my friends had taken me all over the city, finally dropping me off at my own house where the whole gang was gathered for a surprise party. Joe reminded me of that friend.

"There's a village ahead," he said, and the grin on his face was large now, his eyes shining.

SOMETHING was missing here. Natives. There were no natives rushing out to greet us. No cries of "Cigarettes? Cigarettes?" I caught up with Joe.

"What's the story?" I whispered.

He shrugged knowingly and continued walking.

And then I saw the ship, nose pointing into space, catching the rays of the sun like a great silver bullet.

"What . . . ?" I started.

"It's all right," Joe said, smiling.

The ship looked vaguely familiar. I noticed the crest of Space II near the nose, and a lot of things became clear then. I also saw Walsh standing near one of the huts, a stun gun in his hand.

"Hello, Major," he called, almost cheerfully. The gun didn't look cheerful, though. It was pointed at my head.

"Fancy meeting you here, Colonel," I said, trying to match his joviality. Somehow it didn't quite come off.

Joe was walking beside me, waving at the colonel, beaming all over with happiness.

"I see you found your man," Walsh said.

I turned rapidly. Joe nodded and kept grinning, a grin that told me he was getting a big kick out of all this. Like a kid playing a game.

I faced Walsh again. "Okay, what's it all about, pal?"

"Colonel," Walsh corrected me. "You mustn't forget to say Colonel, *Major*." He emphasized my rank, and he said it with a sort of ruthless finality.

I waited. I could see he was just busting to tell me how clever he'd been. Besides, there wasn't much I could do but wait. Not with Walsh pointing the stun gun at my middle.

"We've come a long way since the Academy, haven't we, Major?"

"If you mean in miles," I said, looking

around at the plants, "we sure have."

Walsh grinned a little. "Always the wit," he said drily. And then the smile faded from his lips and his eyes took on a hard lustre. "I'm going to kill you, you know." He said it as if he were saying, "I think it'll rain tomorrow."

Joe almost clapped his hands together with glee. He was really enjoying this. Another of those funny Terran games.

"You gave me a powerful handicap to overcome," Walsh said. "I suppose I should thank you, really."

"You're welcome," I said.

"It wasn't easy living down the disgrace you caused me."

"It was your own damn fault," I said. "You knew what you were doing when you decided to cork off."

Beside me, Joe chuckled a little, enjoying the game immensely.

"You didn't have to report me," Walsh said.

"No? Maybe I should have forgotten all about it? Maybe I should have nudged you and served you orange juice? So you could do it again sometime and maybe blow up the whole damn Academy!"

Walsh was silent for a long time. When he spoke his voice was barely audible. The heat was oppressive, as if it were concentrated on this little spot in the jungle, focusing all its penetration on a small, unimportant drama.

I could hear Joe breathing beside me.

"I'm on my way out," Walsh rasped. "Finished, do you understand?"

"Good," I said. And I meant it.

"This Mars thing. A terrible fix. Terrible."

Beside me, a slight frown crossed Joe's face. Apparently he couldn't understand the seriousness of our voices. What had happened to the game, the fun?

"You brought the Mars business on yourself," I told Walsh. "There was never any trouble before you took command."

"The natives," he practically shouted.

"They . . . they . . ."

Joe caught his breath sharply, and I wondered what Walsh was going to say about the natives. Apparently he'd realized that Joe was a native. Or maybe Joe's knife had something to do with it.

"What about the natives?" I asked.

"Nothing," Walsh said. "Nothing." He was silent for a while.

"A man of my calibre," he said then, his face grim. "Dealing with savages." He caught himself again and threw a hasty glance at Joe. The perplexed frown had grown heavier on Joe's face. He looked at the colonel in puzzlement.

WALSH turned from Joe and raised the stun gun. I wondered if he had yet realized that Joe was one of a million Joes scattered all over this planet, that Joe was all the natives on Venus. That Joe was all the natives everywhere throughout the galaxy. I looked at Walsh's eyes. He was a sick man, alone with his thoughts in the middle of a stinking jungle.

"I'm on my way out, Major," he said, "but you won't get a chance to succeed where I've failed. No. Oh no. I'll see to that."

"And you had to come all the way to Venus to do it?"

"Don't joke," Walsh snapped. "Don't joke, Major. It's not funny. It's not funny at all."

"It's pretty sad, I'd say."

"You can't afford to say anything," Walsh remarked drily. "You're going to be dead in a very few minutes."

Joe's eyes widened, and I saw indecision cross his features as he tried to understand what had happened to the game.

"What'll they say back on Earth when they hear about this?" I asked.

"When will they hear about it? Four, five months from now? By then, my little trip will have been forgotten. Besides, I'm here on a routine check. Everyone knows that."

"A routine check on Venus? Mars is your territory."

"One of my men is up here," Walsh said. "That gives me temporary jurisdiction. At least enough to visit the planet and see how conditions are. Anyway, I'll be home long before Joe here carries your body in."

Joe shook his head imperceptibly but Walsh didn't catch it.

"A casualty in the jungle," Walsh continued. "The native will return to the Station and explain the accident. I'll be back

on Earth long before he reaches there."

"Sure," I said, "nice and simple. You kill me and Joe delivers the news and takes the rap. Good old sucker Joe."

"That's about enough out of you," Walsh said.

"Go ahead, Colonel," I shouted. "Pull the trigger. Then run off and leave Joe to . . ."

"I said that's enough out of you!" Walsh shouted.

I turned to face Joe. His mouth was drawn across his face in a tight emotionless line. He stepped in front of me and stared at Walsh.

"Get out of the way," Walsh commanded.

Joe shook his head slowly. "This is not what you told me. A friend, you said. A surprise. You said you wanted to . . ."

"Get out of the way, you damned sav . . ."

With one swift movement Joe leaped forward. The knife gleamed in his hand and there was momentary panic on Walsh's face.

The stun gun snapped up. It crackled once in the Venusian jungle, its blast blinding me for a moment. It shuddered through Joe's left arm and paralyzed it momentarily.

But the hand with the knife was hacking away at Walsh's throat, the blood dripping down over the silver planet on the collar of his tunic.

I made my report to Bransten.

I told him the body of Colonel Leonard Walsh had been discovered in the jungle. He was barely alive when he'd been found. I'd administered aid but his knife wounds had proved to be fatal. He died shortly after I found him.

"Awful," the captain said, "awful."

I nodded sympathetically.

"Did he say anything? Did he give you any idea, I mean, did he say who did it?"

"Yes," I said. "He told me who murdered him."

We were standing near the platform of my ship, waiting for them to prepare for blastoff.

"Well who, Major?" he asked. "Who did he say did it?"

"Joe," I explained. "A native named Joe."

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CAPTAIN CHAOS

By D. ALLEN MORRISSEY

Science equipped David Corbin with borrowed time; sent him winging out in a state of suspension to future centuries . . . to a dark blue world whose only defense was to seal tight the prying minds of foolish interlopers.

I HEARD the voice as I opened my eyes. I was lying down, still not aware of where I was, waiting for the voice.

"Your name is David Corbin. Do you understand?"

I looked in the direction of the sound. Above my feet a bulkhead loomed. There

were round dials set in a row above a speaker. Over the mesh-covered speaker, two knobs glowed red. I ran the words over in my sluggish mind, thinking about an answer. The muscles in my throat tightened up in reflex as I tried to bring some unity into the jumble of thoughts and ideas that kept form-

ing. One word formed out of the rush of anxiety.

"No."

I shouted a protest against the strangeness of the room. I looked to the right, my eyes following the curving ceiling that started at the cot. The curve met another straight bulkhead on the left. I was in a small room, gray in color, like dull metal. Overhead a bright light burned into my vision. I wondered where in the universe I was.

"Your name is David Corbin. If you understand, press button A on your right."

I stared at the speaker in the wall. The mesh-covered hole and the two lights looked like a caricature of a face, set in a panel of dials. I twisted my head to look for the button. I pushed away from the close wall but I couldn't move. I reached down to the tightness that held my body, found the wide strap that held me and fumbled with the buckle. I threw it off and pushed myself up from the hard cot. I heard myself yell in surprise as I floated up towards the light overhead.

I was weightless.

How do you describe being weightless when you are born into a world bound by gravity. I twisted and shut my eyes in terror. There was no sensation of place, no feeling of up or down, no direction. My back bumped against the ceiling and I opened my eyes to stare at the cot and floor. I was concentrating too hard on remembering to be frightened for long. I pushed away from the warm metal and the floor moved up to meet me.

"If you understand, press button A on your right."

What should I understand? That I was floating in a room that had a curved wall . . . that nothing was right in this hostile room?

When I reached the cot I held it and drew myself down. I glanced at the planes of the room, trying to place it with other rooms I could see in my mind. Gray walls with a crazy curved ceiling . . . a door to my left that appeared to be air tight.

I stared at my familiar hands. I rubbed them against my face, feeling the solidity of flesh and bone, afraid to think too hard about myself.

"My name . . . my name is . . ."

7—PLANET STORIES—November

"Your name is David Corbin."

I stared at the speaker. How long did this go on? The name meant nothing to me, but I thought about it, watching the relentless lights that shone below the dials. I stood up slowly and looked at myself. I was naked except for heavy shorts, and there was no clue to my name in the pockets. The room was warm and the air I had been breathing was good but it seemed wrong to be dressed like this. I didn't know why. I thought about insanity, and the room seemed to fit my thoughts. When the voice repeated the message again I had to act. Walking was like treading water that couldn't be seen or felt.

I floated against the door, twisting the handle in fear that it wouldn't turn. The handle clanged as I pushed it down and I stared at the opposite wall of a narrow gray passageway. I pushed out into it and grasped the metal rail that ran along the wall. I reasoned it was there to propel yourself through the passageway in this weightless atmosphere.

It was effortless to move. I turned on my side like a swimmer and went hand over hand, shooting down the corridor. I braced against forward motion and stopped against a door at the end. Behind me I could see the opened door I had left, and the thought of that questioning voice made me want to move. I swung the door open, catching a glimpse of a room crowded with equipment and . . .

I WILL always remember the scream of terror, the paralyzing fright of what I saw through the portholes in the wall of the room. I saw the blackest night, pierced by brilliance that blinded me. There was no depth to the searing brightness of countless stars. They seemed to press against the glass, blobs of fire against a black curtain burning into my eyes and brain.

It was space.

I looked out at deep space, star systems in clusters. I shut my eyes. When I looked again I knew where I was. Why the little room had been shaped like quarter round. Why I drifted weightlessly. Why I was . . .

David Corbin.

I knew more of the puzzle. Something was wrong. After the first shock of looking

out, I accepted the fact that I was in a space ship, yet I couldn't read the maps that were fastened to a table, nor understand the function or design of the compact machinery.

WHY, Why, Why? The thought kept pounding at me. I was afraid to touch anything in the room. I pressed against the clear window, wondering if the stars were familiar. I had a brief vivid picture of a night sky on Earth. This was not the same sky.

Back in the room where I had awakened, I touched the panel with the glowing eyes. It had asked me if I understood. Now it must tell me why I didn't. It had to help me, that flat metallic voice that repeated the same words. It must tell me . . .

"Your name is David Corbin. If you understand, press button A on your right."

I pressed the button by the cot. The red lights blinked out as I stood in patient attention, trying to outguess the voice. I recalled a phrase . . . some words about precaution.

Precaution against forgetting.

It was crazy, but I trusted the panel. It was the only thing I saw that could help me, guard me against another shock like seeing outside of the clear portholes.

"It is assumed the experiment is a success," the voice said.

What experiment?

"You have been removed from suspension. Assume manual control of this ship." Control of a ship? Going where?

"Do not begin operations until the others are removed from suspension."

What others? Tell me what to do.

"Rely on instructions for factoring when you check the coordinates. Your maximum deviation from schedule cannot exceed two degrees. Adopt emergency procedures as you see fit. Good luck."

The voice snapped off and I laughed hysterically. None of it had made sense, and I cursed whatever madness had put me here.

"Tell me what to do," I shouted wildly. I hammered the hard metal until the pain in my hands made me stop.

"I can't remember what to do."

I held my bruised hands to my mouth, and I knew that was all the message there was. In blind panic I pushed away from the panel. Something tripped me and I fell back

in a graceless arc. I pushed away from the floor, barely feeling the pain in my leg, and went into the hall.

Pain burned along my leg but I couldn't stop. In the first panic of waking up in strangeness I had missed the other doors in the passage. The first swung back to reveal a deep closet holding five bulky suits. The second room was like my own. A dark haired, deep chested man lay on the cot. His muscular body was secured by a wide belt. He was as still as death, motionless without warmth or breath as I hovered over him.

I couldn't remember his face.

The next room held another man. He was young and wiry, like an athlete cast in marble, dark haired and big jawed. A glassy eye stared up when I rolled back his eyelid. The eyelid remained open until I closed it and went on. Another room . . . another man . . . another stranger. This man was tall and raw boned, light of skin and hair, as dead as the others.

A flat, illogical voice had instructed me to revive these men. I shivered in spite of the warmth of the room, studying the black box that squatted on a shelf by his head. My hand shook when I touched the metal. I dared not try to operate anything. Revive the others . . . instructions without knowledge were useless to me. I stopped looking into the doors in the passageway and went back to the room with the portholes. Everything lay in readiness, fastened down star charts, instruments, glittering equipment. There was no feeling of disorder or use in the room. It waited for human hands to make it operate.

Not mine. Not now.

I went past the room into another, where the curves were more sharp. I could visualize the tapering hull leading to the nose of the ship. This room was filled with equipment that formed a room out of the bordered area I stood in. I sat in the deep chair facing the panel of dials and instruments, in easy reach. I ran my hands over the dials, the rows of smooth colored buttons, wondering.

The ports on the side were shielded and I stared out at static energy, hung motionless in a world of searing light. There was no distortion, no movement outside and I glanced back at the dials. What speeds were

they recording? What speeds and perhaps, what distance? It was useless to translate the markings. They stood for anything I might guess, and something kept pricking my mind, telling me I had no time to guess. I thought of time again. I was supposed to act according to . . . plan. Did that mean . . . in time . . . in time. I went back down the passageway.

THE fourth small room was the same. Except for the woman. She lay on a cot, young and beautiful, even in the death-like immobility I had come to accept. Her beauty was graceful lines of face and her figure—smooth tapering legs, soft curves that were carved out of flesh colored stone. Yet not stone. I held her small hand, then put it back on the cot. Her attire was brief like the rest of us, shorts and a man's shirt. Golden hair curled up around her lovely face. I wondered if she would ever smile or move that graceful head. I rolled back her eyelid and looked at a deep blue eye that stared back in glassy surprise. Four people in all, depending on a blind helpless fool who didn't know their names or the reason for that dependence. I sat beside her on the cot until I could stand it no longer.

Searching the ship made me forget my fear. I hoped I would find some answers. I went from the nose to the last bulkhead in a frenzy of floating motion, looking behind each door until I went as far as I could. There were two levels to the ship. They both ended in the lead shield that was set where the swell of the curve was biggest. It meant the engine or engines took up half the ship, cut off from the forward half by the instrument studded shield. I retraced my steps and took a rough estimate of size. The ship, as I called it, was at least four hundred feet long, fifty feet in diameter on the inside.

The silence was a force in itself, pressing down from the metal walls, driving me back to the comforting smallness of the room where I had been reborn. I laughed bitterly, thinking about the aptness of that. I had literally been reborn in this room, equipped with half ideas, and no point to start from, no premise to seek, I sensed the place to start from was back in the room. I searched it carefully.

Minutes later I realized the apparatus by the cot was different. It was the same type of black box, but out from it was a metal arm, bent in a funny angle. At the tip of the arm, a needle gleamed dully and I rubbed the deep gash on my leg. I bent the arm back until the angle looked right. It was then I realized the needle came to a spot where it could have hit my neck when I lay down. My shout of excitement rang out in the room, as I pictured the action of the extended arm. I lost my sudden elation in the cabin where the girl lay. The box behind her head was completely closed, and it didn't yield to the pressure I applied. It had a cover, but no other opening where an arm could extend. I ran my fingers over the unbroken surface, prying over the thin crack at the base helplessly. If some sort of antidote was to be administered manually I was lost. I had no knowledge of what to inject or where to look for it. The chamber of the needle that had awakened me was empty. That meant a measured amount.

In the laboratory on the lower level I went over the rows of cans and tubes fastened to the shelves. There were earths and minerals, seeds and chemicals, testing equipment in compact drawers, but nothing marked for me. I wondered if I was an engineer or a pilot, or perhaps a doctor sent along to safeguard the others. Complete amnesia would have been terrible enough but this half knowledge, part awareness and association with the ship was a frightening force that seemed ready to break out of me.

I went back to the cabin where the powerful man lay. I had to risk failure with one of them. I didn't want it to be the girl. I fought down the thought that he might be the key man, remembering the voice that had given the message. It was up to me, and soon. The metal in the box would have withstood a bullet. It couldn't be pried apart, and I searched again and again for a release mechanism.

I found it.

I swung the massive cover off and set it down. The equipment waited for the touch of a button and it went into operation. I stepped back as the tubes glowed to life and the arm swung down with the gleaming needle. The needle went into the corded neck of the man. The fluid chamber drained

under pressure and the arm moved back.

I stood by the man for long minutes. Finally it came. He stirred restlessly, closing his hands into fists. The deep chest rose and fell unevenly as he breathed. Finally the eyes opened and he looked at me. I watched him adjust to the room. It was in his eyes, wide at first, moving about the confines of the room back to me.

"It looks like we made it," he said.

"Yes."

He unfastened the belt and sat up. I pushed him back as he floated up finding little humor in the comic expression on his face.

"No gravity," he grunted and sat back.

"You get used to it fast," I answered. I thought of what to say as he watched me. "How do you feel?"

He shrugged at the question. "Fine, I guess. Funny, I can't remember."

He saw it in my face, making him stop. "I can't remember dropping off to sleep," he finished.

I held his hard arm. "What else? How much do you remember?"

"I'm all right," he answered. "There aren't supposed to be any effects from this."

"Who is in charge of this ship?" I asked.

He tensed suddenly. "You are, sir. Why?"

I moved away from the cot. "Listen, I can't remember. I don't know your name or anything about this ship."

"What do you mean? What can't you remember?" he asked. He stood up slowly, edging around towards the door. I didn't want to fight him. I wanted him to understand. "Look, I'm in trouble. Nothing fits, except my name."

"You don't know me?"

"No."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, yes, I don't know why but it's happened."

He let his breath out in a whistle. "For God's sake. Any bump on your head?"

"I feel all right physically. I just can't place enough."

"The others. What about the others?" he blurted.

"I don't know. You're the first besides myself. I don't know how I stumbled on the way to revive you."

He shook his head, watching me like I

was a freak. "Let's check the rest right away."

"Yes. I've got to know if they are like me. I'm afraid to think they might be."

"Maybe it's temporary. We can figure something out."

II

THE second man, the dark haired one, opened his eyes and recognized us. He asked questions in rapid fire excitement. The third man, the tall Viking, was all right until he moved. The weightless sensation made him violently sick. We put him back on the cot, securing him again with the belt, but the sight of us floating made him shake. He was retching without results when we drifted out. I followed him to the girl's quarters.

"What about her. Why is she here?" I asked my companion.

He lifted the cover from the apparatus. "She's the chemist in the crew."

"A girl?"

"Dr. Thiesen is an expert, trained for this," he said.

I looked at her. She looked anything but like a chemist.

"There must be men who could have been sent. I've been wondering why a girl."

"I don't know why, Captain. You tried to stop her before. Age and experience were all that mattered to the brass."

"It's a bad thing to do."

"I suppose. The mission stated one chemist."

"What is the mission of this ship?" I asked.

He held up his hand. "We'd better wait, sir. Everything was supposed to be all right on this end. First you, then Carl, sick to his stomach."

"Okay. I'll hold the questions until we see about her."

We were out of luck with the girl. She woke up and she was frightened. We questioned her and she was coherent but she couldn't remember. I tried to smile as I sat on the cot, wondering what she was thinking.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

Her face was a mask of wide-eyed fear as she shook her head.

"Can you remember?"

"I don't know." Blue eyes stared at me in fear. Her voice was low.

"Do you know my name?"

The question frightened her. "Should I? I feel so strange. Give me a minute to think."

I let her sit up slowly. "Do you know your name?"

She tightened up in my arms. "Yes. It's . . ." She looked at us for help, frightened by the lack of clothing we wore, by the bleak room. Her eyes circled the room. "I'm afraid," she cried. I held her and she shook uncontrollably.

"What's happened to me?" she asked.

The dark haired man came into the room, silent and watchful. My companion motioned to him. "Get Carl and meet us in Control."

The man looked at me and I nodded. "We'll be there in a moment. I'm afraid we've got trouble."

He nodded and pushed away from us. The girl screamed and covered her face with her hands. I turned to the other man. "What's your name?"

"Croft. John Croft."

"John, what are your duties if any?"

"Automatic control. I helped to install it."

"Can you run this ship? How about the other two?"

He hit his hands together. "You fly it, sir. Can't you think?"

"I'm trying. I know the ship is familiar, but I've looked it over. Maybe I'm trying too hard."

"You flew her from earth until we went into suspension," he said.

"I can't remember when," I said. I held the trembling girl against me, shaking my head.

He glanced at the girl. "If the calculations are right it was more than a hundred years ago."

We assembled in the control room for a council. We were all a little better for being together. John Croft named the others for me. I searched each face without recognition. The blond man was Carl Herrick, a metallurgist. His lean face was white from his spell but he was better. Paul Sample was a biologist, John said. He was lithe and restless, with dark eyes that studied the rest of us. I looked at the girl. She was staring out

of the ports, her hands pressed against the transparent break in the smooth wall. Karen Thiesen was a chemist, now frightened and trying to remember.

I wasn't in much better condition. "Look, if it comes too fast for me, for any of us, we'll stop. John, you can lead off."

"You ask the questions," he said.

I indicated the ship. "Where in creation are we going?"

"We set out from Earth for a single star in the direction of the center of our Galaxy."

"From Earth? How could we?"

"Let's move slowly, sir," he said. "We're moving fast. I don't know if you can picture it, but we're going about one hundred thousand miles an hour."

"Through space?"

"Yes."

"What direction?"

Paul cut in. "It's a G type star, like our own sun in mass and luminosity. We hope to find a planetary system capable of supporting life."

"I can't grasp it. How can we go very far in a lifetime?"

"It can be done in two lifetimes," John said quietly.

"You said I had flown this ship. You meant before this suspension."

"Yes. That's why we can cross space to a near star."

"How long ago was it?"

"It was set at about a hundred years, sir. Doesn't that fit at all?"

"I can't believe it's possible."

Carl caught my eye. "Captain, we save this time without aging at all. It puts us near a calculated destination."

"We've lost our lifetime." It was Karen. She had been crying silently while we talked.

"Don't think about it," Paul said. "We can still pull this out all right if you don't lose your nerve."

"What are we to do?" she asked.

John answered for me. "First we've got to find out where we are. I know this ship but I can't fly it."

"Can I?" I asked.

WE SET up a temporary plan of action. Paul took Karen to the laboratory in an effort to help her remember her job. Carl went back to divide the rations.

I was to study the charts and manuals. It was better than doing nothing, and I went into the navigation room and sat down. Earth was an infinitesimal point somewhere behind us on the galactic plane, and no one else was trained to navigate. The ship thundered to life as I sat there. The blast roared once . . . twice, then settled into a muted crescendo of sound that hummed through the walls. I went into the control room and watched John at the panel.

"I wish I knew what you were doing," I said savagely.

"Give it time."

"We can't spare any, can we?" I asked.

"I wish we knew. What about her—Dr. Thiesen?"

"She's in the lab, I don't think that will do much good. She's got to be shocked out of a mental state like that."

"I guess you're right," he said slowly. "She's trained to administer the suspension on the return trip."

I let my breath out slowly. "I didn't think about that."

"We couldn't even get part way back in a lifetime," he said.

"How old are you, John?"

"Twenty-eight."

"What about me?"

"Thirty." He stared at the panel in thought for a minutes. "What about shock treatment? It sounds risky."

"I know. It's the only thing I could think of. Why didn't everyone react the same?"

"That had me wondering for a while. I don't know. Anyway how could you go about making her remember?"

"Throw a crisis, some situation at her, I guess."

He shrugged, letting his sure hands rest on the panel of dials. I headed back towards the lab. If I could help her I might help myself. I was past the rooms when the horn blasted through the corridor. I turned automatically with the sound, pushing against the rail, towards the control room. Deep in my mind I could see danger, and without questioning why I knew I had to be at Control when the sound knifed through the stillness. John was shouting as I thrust my way into the room.

"Turn the ship. There's something dead ahead."

I had a glimpse of his contorted face as I dove at the control board. My hands hit buttons, thumbed a switch and then a sudden force threw me to the right. I slammed into the panel on the right, as the pressure of the change dimmed my vision. Reflex made me look up at the radar control screen.

It wasn't operating.

John let go of the padded chair, grinning weakly. I was busy for a few seconds, feeding compensation into the gyros. Relief flooded through me like warm liquid. I hung on the intercom for support, drawing air into my heaving lungs.

"What—made you—think of that," I asked weakly.

"Shock treatment."

"I must have acted on instinct."

"You did. Even for a sick man that was pretty fast," he laughed.

"I can think again, John. I know who I am," I shouted. I threw my arms around his massive shoulders. "You did it."

"You gave me the idea, Mister, talking about Dr. Thiesen."

"It worked, I'm okay," I said in giddy relief.

"I don't have to tell you I was scared as hell. I wish you could have seen your face, the look in your eyes when I woke up."

"I wouldn't want to wake up like that again."

"You're all right now?" he asked. I grinned and nodded an answer. I saw John as he was at the base, big and competent, sweating in the blazing sun.

I thought about the rest of the crew too. "We're heading right for a star . . ."

"It's been dead ahead for hours," he grunted. I leaned over and threw the intercom to open. "This is control. Listen . . . everyone. I'm over it. Disregard the warning siren . . . we were testing the ship."

The lab light blinked on as Paul cut in. "What was it . . . hey, you said you're all right."

"John did it. He hit the alarm figuring I would react. Listen, Paul. Is any one hurt?"

"No. Carl is here too. His stomach flopped again but he's okay. What about food. We're supposed to be checked before we eat."

"We'll have to go ahead without it. Any change?"

"No. I put her to bed. Shall I bring food?"

I glanced at John. He rubbed his stomach. "Yes," I answered. "Bring it when you can. I've got to find out where we are."

We had to get off course before we ran into the yellow-white star that had been picked for us. Food was set down by me, grew cold and was carried away and I was still rechecking the figures. We were on a line ten degrees above the galactic plane. The parallax baseline from Earth to the single star could be in error several degrees, or we could be right on the calculated position of the star. The radar confirmed my findings . . . and my worst fears. When we set it for direction and distance, the screen glowed to life and recorded the star dead ahead.

In all the distant star clusters, only this G type star was thought to have a planetary system like our own. We were out on a gamble to find a planet capable of supporting life. The idea had intrigued scientists before I had first looked up at the night sky. When I was sure the electronically recorded course was accurate for time, I checked direction and speed from the readings and plotted our position. If I was right we were much closer than we wanted to be. The bright pips on the screen gave us the distance and size of the star while we fed the figures into the calculator for our rate of approach.

Spectroscopic tests were run on the sun and checked against the figures that had been calculated on Earth. We analyzed temperature, magnetic fields, radial motion, density and luminosity, checking against the standards the scientists had constructed. It was a G type star like our own. It had more density and temperature and suitable planets or not, we had to change course in a hurry. Carl analyzed the findings while we came to a decision. Somewhere along an orbit that might be two hundred miles across, our hypothetical planet circled this star. That distance was selected when the planets in Earth's solar system had proved to be barren. If the observations on this star were correct, we could expect to find a planet in a state of fertility . . . if it existed . . . if it were suitable for colonization . . . if we could find it.

"SO FAR, so good," said Carl as he laid the papers down.

"What's your guess about planets?"

Carl shrugged. "I wouldn't care to even guess that."

"Here's something," Paul shouted and we looked up at the screen.

Another mass was recorded. "It's too close," he commented. "But it's something at least."

"We'll have to head for a probable orbit and follow it," I said.

"The whole thing looks improbable up close," John said.

"I agree," Paul said.

"Consider this. We're thirty days past its probable orbit. That's quite some figuring, roughly a small fraction of one percent. Unbelievably small error considering the distance we've come. I'm willing to stake my life that there will be such a planet."

"One thing," said John, "if this planet should exist we can find it in less than a year by following its probable orbit."

"That's half our answer," Carl said. "We can still look farther out with the radar."

John shook his head ponderously. "I remember when they first tested this drive. To the moon and back in sixty hours, with the ship so hot you could fry eggs on the wall. Now with the bugs taken out we can hit two million miles in an Earth day."

"Remember Ellington talking about the speed of light within the realm of fuels and metals?"

"Yeah. We could meet some of our children's children coming out to meet us."

"Except that married men didn't make this trip," I reminded them.

When we turned and set up an arbitrary course we were within forty million miles of the brilliant sun. Opaque shields went over the portholes to keep out the blinding glare, and we settled down to the routine of resting and watching the instruments. I set up two man watches, partly to keep us from getting in each other's way in the crowded quarters. The ship, with its bulk cut in half by the engines had never been designed for comfort. There was enough room for flight operations, but little privacy. Besides the five small cabins on the upper level there was a series of equipment lockers and the larger navigation and control room.

Below, the gallery and the laboratory were set forward of the air lock. Another small room where waste could be jettisoned out, broke up the pattern of equipment that was braced sideways for landing. Adequate space, if not ample, but Karen presented a problem. Scientist or not, she was a woman who hadn't realized that privacy would be hard to achieve aboard the ship.

We changed our comfortable attire for uniforms from the clothing locker, and tried to ignore Karen's brief costume. At the start of my third watch I met Paul coming out of Karen's room.

"Paul, you and John better get some rest. I'll call you in six hours if nothing comes up."

"Okay sir. I was just looking in on her."

I met his glance, knowing how he had felt about her back at the base.

"I wasn't checking on you. We all feel badly about Dr. Thiesen. Has she made any progress?" I asked.

"No," he said flatly. "Whatever it is, we'll have to wait and hope she gets better. I've tried talking to her." His face was set in hard lines as he spoke. "She doesn't know me. Talks a little about the field at El Paso. Not much sense to it."

"Why did she have to come?" I asked. It had bothered me since I first placed my background. I hadn't known her very well at the base. There had been conferences we attended together, but her clinical attitude and the shapeless white uniform she wore gave her a neutral quality. I had never seen what she was like physically until now. I sat with her and Paul at a night club one night, staring across a table at a tanned goddess in a low cut gown that shimmered in the candlelight. She had spoiled the moment when she laughed and teased me about taking time out for a drink. Later there had been a few dances, brief conversations about people and events. Nothing on a personal basis. I had been in love with her for months but preparations for the trip kept me too busy to do anything about it. Now she was here.

"You asked me that several times," Paul said. "She's a trained technician. Isn't that enough?"

"You knew her better than anyone at the base, didn't you?"

"Better than most guys. There were always plenty of guys who asked her out. I knew she could only see one guy. That's all we ever talked about."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"Forget it. He didn't give her a tumble."

"Real brainy guy, I'll bet."

Paul changed the subject. "Anything of interest yet. We didn't pick up a thing."

"Carl is checking again. If we don't hit it we'll have to go farther out," I said.

"It may be out there, but the chances get down to infinitesimal percents," he said wearily.

"You said it was possible."

"Anything is possible. Find a mass that has cooled sufficiently to provide the right temperature for the accomplishment of chemical processes, maybe you'll find a system capable of supporting life."

"We may not find it, but I had to see what was this close."

Paul smiled briefly. "Whither thou goest . . . I can't get sympathetic about an overcrowded condition on Earth. Hell, birth control could have helped the balance of nature, but this—this is worth looking for."

III

I DRIFTED in to talk with Karen. She turned her head to look at me.

"How do you feel?" I asked briskly.

She had control of her emotions, after the first shock had worn off.

"I feel better . . . thank you." Lines of concentration were in her lovely face.

"Would you like some water?"

"Paul brought me some."

"Do you know Paul?"

She shook her head, "No. I know your names. What did you think about when you woke up?"

"Not much of anything. I could remember a little. That's what made it so hard to take."

"I remember a part of it, I think," she said hopefully.

"You just rest. You'll be fine in no time."

She looked at me until I turned away in confusion. "Did we know each other before?"

"Yes."

"What does that mean when you say it like that?"

"I didn't know you very well. You were busy most of the time, or just not around. It means I would have liked to know you better if it had been possible."

"What do I look like?" she asked.

I could see her sitting across a small table, looking at me over graceful hands that held a wine glass.

"Don't you know?"

She shook her golden curls. "I never thought about it until now."

I found a thick, stainless metal tray in the galley and brought it to her. She looked at her reflection. She held it to her breast with hands folded over it and closed her troubled eyes.

WE RECORDED the presence of an unknown mass ten days later. It was on the orbit we had intercepted. The electronic radar screen gave us the first indication, transmitting its speed and size into figures that were fed into the calculator. We set the ship on automatic control, tracking the body by instrument. For the next two weeks we were in a constantly shortening trajectory.

Our course was navigated by the slower moving stars beyond the planet as the sleek ship carried us closer, day by day. The discovery of the planet had snapped Karen out of the lethargic condition she had come to know as her existence.

Carl worked with her in the lab while we installed the deceleration cots in the navigation room. The padded chair in the control room was positioned so I could check our rate of fall in the radar when we came in tail first. The last two days sleep was forgotten as we spent our time in front of the screen, watching the image grow larger and larger, processing the constant readings into the automatic equipment that gave us specifications on our new world.

It was slightly larger than Earth, with a mass six times heavier than water. On the last day we began to perceive the variations in the surface. It was mostly covered with water, with a large land mass cutting diagonally from the tipped polar cap to the high south latitudes. Other lands masses were revealed as the planet revolved in thirty earth hours.

"Look at this," Carl said.

He thrust a rough map towards us. "Here's the distribution of land and water. It's probably in a stage like the Cenozoic era. These mountains are rugged, not worn down by wind or weather. Here, this looks like glacial activity down into the temperate zone."

We studied the penciled map he had drawn. There was no resemblance to Earth, but when the spectrograph analysis showed vegetation we began to think of it as home.

How shall I describe what we felt when the ship thudded on solid ground? My ears were still pounding with the echo of the roaring jets, as I lay on my back in the chair and watched the radar pip off point zero. Gravity was a new sensation, pulling me back and making my head ache as blood rushed to it. The engines had cut out, yet I still felt the vibration going through it. It was daylight on the planet and golden brightness poured into the ship.

There was an air of dulled emotion in the others as if they could absorb only so much newness and no more. I felt it too as I climbed down to them. We crowded around the porthole talking excitedly.

"What do you make of it," John asked.

I stood by Karen, looking out in silence. We were three hundred and fifty feet in the air. Below I could see the fin of the tail. Out from that a carpet of vegetation sloped up to a jungle-like forest of leafy trees. Everything was blue in color as far as I could see.

"I'd like to walk around down there," Carl said.

"Anything moving?" Paul asked.

"Not that I can see. A few clouds, sort of low over those peaks."

I had the eerie sensation that it looked familiar. All but the color.

"It looks like an unexplored jungle," Karen said.

"I wonder what's out there," Paul said. Far away to the left of the ship, a series of raw mountains thrust up like hackles into the thick clouds. "We may as well run some tests now. Maybe we can go outside while it's still light," Carl suggested.

"Or maybe we won't go out at all," I remarked. The valley where the ship had landed looked too peaceful.

WE climbed down the wall ladder to the laboratory. Captive air filled a pressure tank while I watched them set up the testing equipment. We had picked a region near water in the temperate belt of the planet, and the temperature recorded seventy degrees with the sun overhead as Carl started to analyze the gas structure of the atmosphere.

"What are you doing?" Karen asked. She had found a skirt to wear. Her blonde hair was long, tied back with a ribbon. I would have felt more at ease if she hadn't groomed herself while we went ahead to the lab.

"Testing the air, Doctor," Carl grunted. She thrust her hands into the pockets of the skirt, standing with her feet wide spread, man fashion.

"Are we going outside?" she asked.

"We're not going to a picnic," I blurted sharply, thinking about the equipment we would have to lower from the ship. I was sorry I had spoken forgetting for an instant the rough time she was having. She stepped back at the loudness of my voice, crimson spreading to her cheeks. She bit her lip, blurring, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We're all getting jumpy I guess," I said.

Paul stepped to her and put his arm around her shoulders in assurance. "We will know in a few minutes."

"I just wanted to walk in the sunshine," she said. "It was always so hot at El Paso. The heat used to make the mountains shimmer."

Paul straightened up. "Do you remember the base?"

She nodded, "Yes. I used to work in a white building. We had a radio in lab but it never played when they tested the engines."

"Do you remember the little bar?"

"I think so . . . where I danced and a funny man made faces when he played the piano," she mused. Paul shook his head at us. We had stopped watching the colors change in the tubes. I could picture the squat concrete buildings that sat on a

checkerboard of dusty roads.

"Karen, try to think. Do you recall when we went to the ship. It rained for the first time in months that night. We drove in the rain."

"I was afraid of the ship," she said.

I remembered the lights of the truck, dim in the glare of the flood lights that criss-crossed through the driving rain. I hadn't known who the new replacement would be as they climbed out of the car and ran to the shelter. I thought she had come to say good-bye to Paul, using her father's influence to break regulations. Someone had thrust a watch in my face and I went out to the ship without talking to her.

Seventeen minutes before blast off I had gone to the small cabin where I would spend the next century. Karen was there checking the master control.

"You aren't going along," I had shouted in fear. The area was being cleared and I knew she was the replacement.

"You cannot change the orders, Captain Corbin."

She had been right. We were sealed in and the official voice on the radio cut me short, repeating the order only once. We would leave on schedule.

"Why?" I had shouted, "You're young and beautiful. You're risking your life in this."

"I have my reasons, as I'm sure you do."

"You cannot come because of Paul."

"It isn't because of Paul," she answered coolly. I was still trying to get the officials to change it when the ten minute warning sounded. Then it was too late. I was still wondering why when we switched to automatic drive, far out in space. Then it was time to press the button that operated the suspension. The others were all ready in a dreamless sleep as I watched my arm fall back. The room grew dim. The last thing I remembered was counting the dials on the panel, saying her name over and over.

"I was afraid of the ships," Karen said to Paul. "I don't know why I came."

John nudged my arm. "We can go out, Dave. It's all right."

This was better to think about. It was easier to follow routine, giving orders about

equipment and planning.

"We go out in twos. John, you and I first. We'll stay by the ship and move fast if we spot anything. Paul, you and Carl exit in ten minutes on signal."

"What about Karen," Paul asked.

"Dr. Thiesen stays in the ship," I answered. "John, break out the ammunition. We'll lower the scout car if everything looks all right."

"I'm going too," Karen cried. She doubled her small hands into fists.

"You stay here. That's an order. I'm responsible for the safety of this ship. We don't know what's out there."

"Responsible to whom?" she said angrily.

"Every man on this ship."

"You just ordered them to go out."

"Look, they have work to do."

"I won't stay here alone."

"I can lock you in a storeroom if I have to."

Karen turned away blindly and started to cry. The room was suddenly filled with tension.

"Karen, stop that crying," I said.

"I'm not," she said, but she couldn't stop the flood of hysteria that shook her. I turned her around and slapped her face.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," I said humbly. Her wide eyes didn't believe me.

"Aren't you taking your job rather big," Paul said tensely.

"I didn't enjoy doing that, Paul. I think you know that."

"Karen is part of this crew. Why single her out for rough treatment?"

John rubbed his hands together and moved to my side. "Dave knows what he's doing," he said gruffly.

"Forget it, John. Don't make me pull rank, Paul. You may be out of military jurisdiction but I'm still in charge of this mission. If I thought you were responsible for bringing her . . ."

"Don't threaten me, Captain," he said. They were all specialists in their respective fields, enjoying a loose immunity from the routine of the base. Here they were even more independent and my job was to get them here, nothing more.

"Don't argue because of me," Karen said abruptly. "Go out and claim your blue world in the name of science."

"Thank you," I said. "We'll be back for you."

JOHN'S bulk was a comforting presence. We stood on the rim of the scorched circle of thick vegetation watching the unbroken monotony of the bluish growth. Nothing moved except the bushes as the wind skipped across the flowery tops of the plants.

"I've never seen anything like this," John said.

"I don't think there is anything like this," I breathed. It was hard to believe the color and delicate structure of the landscape was not a setting, painted with bright blues and greens, daubed with light and darks of all colors where clusters of flowering plants shone in the sunlight.

"It's good, very good," he said.

"Yes. I think fairy tales were written for a view like this. It's a pity we won't get back to tell about it."

John frowned and rested the rifle on the ground. "She was better in the ship. You heard her talk about the base."

"But she doesn't remember what we need. I'm afraid it's useless," I said glumly.

He scuffed up scorched earth with his foot. "Then why are we going ahead with all these plans?"

"To keep from thinking about the other, I guess. I know what you've all been thinking. So have I. I even thought we might stay here and hope someone else would try in our lifetime. That's out. There are four men and one girl."

"Then what will you do?"

"I don't know yet, John. I haven't thought about it because it isn't good."

"There's nothing moving yet, sir," John said. "You remembered when you had to. We can wait until she thinks of how to operate the suspension."

"The longer we wait the more chance of another kind of trouble."

"Karen?"

"Yes. Or you or me, Paul or Carl. Any-one of us can start trouble."

"Sure. It's tough having her around all right," he said. "I always thought she was a cool number, all study and no play. It's different when you can't help see that kind

of beauty."

I moved around the area restlessly, not watching the landscape as much as I had. "You in love with her, John?"

"I suppose I am. Not in the way you are," he said. He was studying the black ground intently, not looking up at me.

"How do you know?"

"I knew back at the base. You showed it in your eyes every time she was around."

"Everybody looked when she came into a room," I said.

"That isn't the same either." He stood up, grinning at me. "This climate is bad for us. It's got us talking like school children."

I signaled the others and we went back in to get equipment. The power-crane swung the tank-like scout car down, and we spent busy minutes loading it with the testing facilities we would take with us. I didn't share Paul's enthusiasm as he fidgeted to get started. The sun was down near the top of the mountain range when we roared up the valley for our first look past the forest.

We rode for several miles up a winding valley, heading for higher ground. We kept looking back at the silver ship until it slipped out of our view. Carl sang an old Viking ballad as the tracks of the car dwindled out behind us. The blue was changing into deep purple hues in the shadow of the mountains, an incredible, breathtaking shade of color that made me feel like singing too. We stopped on a high rise of ground and got out. Paul and Carl worked in a circle, setting the portable equipment down, taking samples of the plants and soil. John and I sat on the top of the armored car, watching the alien landscape for movement.

IV

THE high powered rifle in my hands felt out of place in the peaceful looking land, but we kept watching back to back, while the two men worked and talked quietly. John spotted our visitors first. We turned at his shout, looking in the direction of his outthrust arm. Five or six small creatures bounded through the vegetation that grew to our knees. They came towards

us in bouncing leaps, and we were so quiet in frozen motion, we could hear the swishing as they approached. John still held his rifle in his lap. When he raised it, I whispered.

"Don't kill anything." We were intruders here. I thought about unseen Gods watching this scene unfold. The creatures were about a hundred feet away when they saw us. They stopped, as if by command, vanishing into the thick grass. Nothing moved for a minute. Carl still held a spade in his hand, bent over in the act of digging. Paul was kneeling, holding a thick plant in gloved hands. Then we saw the creatures again, bounding closer. They were bigger than rabbits, fat and furry in appearance with large round eyes. As they came over the tops of the grass, I followed the first in the sights of the rifle until it was close enough to distinguish the brown fur and short legs. The others, there were six in all, hopped cautiously behind the leader and stopped in a comical straight line.

Carl straightened his back and they were gone. I stood up on the hood and watched them reappear.

"Here they are," I said quietly, pointing in front of the car. The creatures were twenty feet away, watching us with eyes that never blinked.

"Hey," shouted Paul to relieve the tension. They stood their ground.

"What's the idea of you six fat clowns scaring us?"

"I forgot to breathe," Carl said, sucking air into his lungs.

"They got us outnumbered but they look harmless," John chuckled.

"They're surely not afraid. I expected they might blast us with a bolt of lightning or something," I laughed.

Not so much as a twitch of a nose greeted us. The creatures were four-footed, with large hindlegs. They evidently belonged with the flora, where we didn't.

"Are they young ones?" I asked Paul. He shrugged. "Show me an old one and I'll tell you better. We'll need at least one specimen for our report."

"Not now," I said. "We've made a good impression, at least." John and I kept watch on our visitors as the techni-

cians kept at their work. The six creatures regarded us for a few minutes, then as if their curiosity was satisfied they bounded away, emitting piping cries.

"I wish we would have taken one," Paul commented dryly. My hands were wet where I held the rifle.

"I'm glad we didn't just yet," I said to the group.

We raced the deepening shadows back to the ship. Paul and Carl put their guesses as to the nature of the animals in scientific language. I couldn't help thinking of them as bundles of fur that had seemed friendly. My sense of fitness made me wonder if mankind should disturb this blue world. I could see the relentless feelers of an Earth civilization clearing the land for cities, exterminating whatever didn't fit, like the caricatures of rabbits that paid us a call.

It was late for such thoughts. Our valley had started to change when we came into it. I couldn't explain why but it made me sadder than I had felt in a long time. We got back to the ship as the sunlight faded. The tip of the gleaming projectile caught the last rays of daylight as we climbed out of the scout car. We unloaded the supplies and put them in the crane. I was shivering in the sudden cool wind as John started up the ladder. Blackness settled down like a cloak until we could only see each other and the ship. The ship blazed with light and we waited for John to operate the crane. He shouted from the hatchway high above us, "Karen is gone."

She wasn't in the ship. We searched both sections thoroughly without success. We left everything where it was, taking flashlights and rifles, spreading out from the ship to look for her in the darkness. On both sides I could see the lights of the others, growing smaller and apart. Our shouts echoed across a widening circle, as I walked and swung the light of the torch. Minutes later I could no longer hear the others. I was hemmed in by the darkness, eerie and silent. My flashlight beam picked up the thick trucks of the tangled forest, and I had to turn and walk along the edge, farther and farther from safety.

It must have been five or six minutes later that I heard the sound. I was call-

ing her name less and less in fear of attracting some wild beast, but I had to chance it in case she was cut off from the light.

"David. David. Over here."

I heard something move in the direction of the sound. My muscles tightened as the rustling stopped.

"David, please."

Karen, I thought, but I was afraid to move. It sounded like her voice, but there was something else in the night. I swore in fear, conjuring up some nightmare that might be enticing me into the woods, reading my mind and calling in a soft voice.

"David, help me."

"Karen," I shouted, straining to hear the voice again. Something moved in the carpet of thick growth. I swung the light in a full circle, but the blackness seemed to absorb it.

"Where are you?" I shouted.

I heard the noise and started to bring the light to bear, with the automatic held in my other hand. I was halfway around when the light picked out something big and black that sprang with a snarl. A tearing pain slammed into my chest, hurling me back as the light spun away. Something fell on me. I reached out and caught thick fur, jamming the gun into it, firing until all eight shots were out. I was barely conscious from the pain, pushing away from the weight across me. I rolled free and started to fall through black space, head over heels through the ripping hiss of the roar in my head.

Something stopped my headlong plunge and I felt my head being lifted. I could hear Karen talking from a million miles distant, then shots exploded in my ear.

"David," she screamed. I couldn't breath or lift my left arm as I struggled to get up.

"Karen, where were you?"

"Here, right here. I kept hearing you shout but I was afraid to answer." She shined the flashlight on me. "Dear God, you're hurt," she cried.

"What . . . was it," I asked. I rolled to my knees as she shined the light on the creature. I stared at it and shuddered through the pain in my chest. It was as big as a bear with thick hindlegs and a mas-

sive blunt face that stuck out of hunched shoulders. Black blood oozed from the gaping holes in its chest, staining the fur and dripping on the crumpled grass.

"What kind of a beast is that?" I said in wonder. It had moved with the speed of a machine when it struck me.

"I heard it following me in the dark. I ran into the trees and kept still."

"It went for the light when it hit me. Maybe it has no sense of smell."

"It didn't come any closer when I stopped. I was afraid to shout at you. Oh David, look at your arm."

I felt the blood on my arm, shaking my head. "Not that. Something's wrong with my chest. I think it busted some ribs when it jumped me."

I tried to ease the fire in my body, but I couldn't move very far before knives jabbed into my flesh.

"We've got to get out of here," she whimpered.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. David, I'm so ashamed. I should have stayed in the ship."

"Just so you're not hurt, Karen. There's a clip in my pocket. Fire the rest of your clip."

"It's empty."

"Then fire just four of these." I was too busy worrying about us to ask her why she had left the ship. She fired the shots in rapid order.

She tried to help me up, but the needles stuck me again. "No use. Let me down easy," I grunted. I started to black out again, reaching out to grab her to keep from doing so."

The stars quit flashing in my head and I came to with my head in her lap. Her firm legs cushioned me. She was holding my bloody arm.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"You're hurt," she answered. I had to hold her hand to keep from blacking out. "I'm just scared. Why did you leave the ship? It was nearly dark when we left."

"I was trying to find you."

"What happened?"

She tore away my shirt sleeve carefully, wiping away the warm stickiness. Her voice was choked when she spoke. "I remember. I was trying to find the car to tell

you. It got dark so fast I got lost coming back. Then I heard that . . ."

"Forget about that. Karen, you're memory is back?"

"Yes. Everything makes sense now."

"And you wanted to see Paul." I said.

"Not Paul, you."

She was too far ahead of me. I was content to lie and hold her hand tightly, feeling the warmth of her.

"Oh David, I found your picture. That's why I remembered."

"I don't understand."

"It isn't very clear, but when I got on the ship I put my personal things in a small suitcase. I saw it later but I didn't know it was mine. After you had gone I suddenly thought about putting it somewhere. I had shoved it in the clothing locker because I wouldn't need it."

"Finding it made you remember."

"Yes. Listen. I hear them shouting. They're coming to find us. Your picture was in that suitcase. I had taken it from a bulletin board."

"What are you trying to tell me?" I asked. I thought I was unable to trust the thoughts that came to mind.

"Stop moving. I don't know why I'm telling you this," she said. I tried to get up. "Karen . . ." I stopped when I heard the others. "Fire the clip," I shouted as I rolled away from her. It hurt me to move and I groaned. The gun roared in the quiet air and she dropped down beside me.

"David."

"S'all right," I managed to grunt.

"They're coming. Don't try to move."

"Karen. Come here before they get here. You were telling me about the picture."

"Yes. I love you. You're hard headed, so very busy, so very military, David."

"I must have addled my brains. I thought I heard you say you loved me."

"I love you."

I tried to get up but she held me back. "Karen, I had to come here to find you. I've loved you ever since—"

"Don't talk," she urged gently.

"I've got so much to tell you. I wanted to say it so many times."

She silenced me with a soft hand and shouted to the others. I could see the lights

lobbing closer as she brushed my lips.
 "We have a life time to say it, David."

"But so long to wait—"

"Sleep is timeless. We will be together before we go back," she whispered.

"Much will have changed before we get back," I said doubtfully. "People and ideas may be different—"

"Does it matter?"

"All that counts is us."

I HAVE finished the last entry in the log of the *Pioneer*. Everything that has happened is here, from waking to now. In the two weeks we stayed after I was hurt, the others roamed farther from the ship, mapping, testing, collecting the proof that this world would do. It was a wild country, young and free, big with space and challenge. It would fight man's coming like the Earth had fought advance, hurling storms and force against civilization. Sitting at this table, I can still picture the sun on the dark mountains, the restless life that will change when another ship returns. There is no pain to remind me of its power, only a half wistful sense of loss. The specimens and records are stored away for the trip. They will tell our children the gamble is won. Some day soon, in a relative time, new pioneers will thrust

their strength and courage across the forests and fields of our new worlds. That is as it should be, for born in man is an indomitable urge to reach out and touch the stars. On the last day, before we blasted off for home, we drove out and left a message on an outcropping of stone. Burned into the face of a blue marble cliff is our prophesy. Acid ate the letters out of stone; faith put them in our minds to set down.

HERE LIES AN UNEXPLORED WORLD.
 CLEAR ITS FIELDS AND MOVE ON.
 THERE IS NO POINT OF RETURN
 FOR DESTINY.

We drank a toast in silence as Karen prepared us for the long journey. Afterwards we shook hands, and I watched the men go to sleep as I had done once before.

Karen and I delayed a few minutes to talk of nothing, watching the stars from the control room. Her kiss was brief, but hard and full of promise as her eyes fluttered closed. She whispered for me to sleep well. I went to the navigation room to finish the last entry. That is done now. The log is up to date. I leave it open to the page where the next new entry will be recorded with the others.

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The lizards screamed and hissed above them. "They're coming again," the girl managed to gasp.

SHANNACH—THE LAST

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Even in this grip of alien horror a man could not throw away his lifetime goal . . . not stand idly by as endless rows of alabaster shapes, seated in their chairs of stone, thought-ruled this gargoyle planet from the dead blackness of deep Mercurian caverns.

IT was dark in the caves under Mercury. It was hot, and there was no sound in them but the slow plodding of Trevor's heavy boots.

Trevor had been wandering for a long time, lost in this labyrinth where no human being had ever gone before. And Trevor was an angry man. Through no fault or

will of his own he was about to die, and he was not ready to die. Moreover, it seemed a wicked thing to come to his final moment here in the stifling dark, buried under alien mountains high as Everest.

He wished now that he had stayed in the valley. Hunger and thirst would have

done for him just the same, but at least he would have died in the open like a man, and not like a rat trapped in a drain.

Yet there was not really much to choose between them as a decent place to die. A barren little hell-hole the valley had been, even before the quake, with nothing to draw a man there except the hope of finding sun-stones, one or two of which could transform a prospector into a plutocrat.

Trevor had found no sun-stones. The quake had brought down a whole mountain wall on his ship, leaving him with a pocket torch, a handful of food tablets, a canteen of water, and the scant clothing he stood in.

He had looked at the naked rocks, and the little river frothing green with chemical poisons, and he had gone away into the tunnels, the ancient blowholes of a cooling planet, gambling that he might find a way out of the valleys.

Mercury's Twilight Belt is cut into thousands of cliff-locked pockets, as a honeycomb is cut into cells. There is no way over the mountains, for the atmosphere is shallow, and the jagged peaks stand up into airless space. Trevor knew that only one more such pocket lay between him and the open plains. If he could get to and through that last pocket, he had thought . . .

But he knew now that he was not going to make it.

He was stripped to the skin already, in the terrible heat. When the weight of his miner's boots became too much to drag, he shed them, padding on over the rough rock with bare feet. He had nothing left now but the torch. When the light went, his last hope went with it.

After a while it went.

The utter blackness of the grave shut down. Trevor stood still, listening to the pulse of his own blood in the silence, looking at that which no man needs a light to see. Then he flung the torch away and stumbled on, driven to fight still by the terror which was greater than his weakness.

Twice he struck against the twisting walls, and fell, and struggled up again. The third time he remained on hands and knees, and crawled.

He crept on, a tiny creature entombed in the bowels of a planet. The bore grew

smaller and smaller, tightening around him. From time to time he lost consciousness, and it became increasingly painful to struggle back to an awareness of the heat and the silence and the pressing rock.

After one of these periods of oblivion he began to hear a dull, steady thunder. He could no longer crawl. The bore had shrunk to a mere crack, barely large enough for him to pass through wormlike on his belly. He sensed now a deep, shuddering vibration in the rock. It grew stronger, terrifying in that enclosed space. Steam slipped wraithlike into the smothering air.

The roar and the vibration grew to an unendurable pitch. Trevor was near to strangling in the steam. He was afraid to go on, but there was no other way to go. Quite suddenly his hands went out into nothingness.

The rock at the lip of the bore must have been rotten with erosion. It gave under his weight and pitched him headfirst into a thundering rush of water that was blistering hot and going somewhere in a great hurry through the dark.

After that Trevor was not sure of anything. There was the scalding heat and the struggle to keep his head up and the terrible speed of the sub-Mercurian river racing on to its destiny. He struck rock several times, and once he held his breath for a whole eternity until the roof of the tunnel rose up again.

He was only dimly aware of a long sliding fall downward through a sudden brightness. It was much cooler. He splashed feebly, because his brain had not told his body to stop, and the water did not fight him.

His feet and hands struck solid bottom. He floundered on, and presently the water was gone. He made one attempt to rise. After that he lay still.

The great mountains leaned away from the Sun. Night came, and with it violent storm and rain. Trevor did not know it. He slept, and when he woke the savage dawn was making the high cliffs flame with white light.

Something was screaming above his head.

Aching and leaden still with exhaustion, he roused up and looked about him.

HE sat on a beach of pale grey sand. At his feet were the shallows of a grey-green lake that filled a stony basin some half-mile in breadth. To his left the underground river poured out of the cliff face, spreading into a wide, riffing fan of foam. Off to his right, the water spilled over the rim of the basin to become a river again somewhere below, and beyond the rim, veiled in mist and the shadow of a mountain wall, was a valley.

Behind him, crowding to the edge of the sand, were trees and ferns and flowers, alien in shape and color but triumphantly alive. And from what he could see of it, the broad valley was green and riotous with growth. The water was pure, the air had a good smell, and it came to Trevor that he had made it. He was going to live a while longer, after all.

Forgetting his weariness, he sprang up, and the thing that had hissed and screamed above him swooped down and passed the clawed tip of a leathery wing so close to his face that it nearly gashed him. He stumbled backward, crying out, and the creature rose in a soaring spiral and swooped again.

Trevor saw a sort of flying lizard, jet black except for a saffron belly. He raised his arms to ward it off, but it did not attack him, and as it swept by he saw something that woke in him amazement, greed, and a peculiarly unpleasant chill of fear.

Around its neck the lizard-thing wore a golden collar. And set into the scaly flesh of its head—into the bone itself, it seemed—was a sun-stone.

There was no mistaking that small vicious flash of radiance. Trevor had dreamed of sun-stones too long to be misled. He watched the creature rise again into the steamy sky and shivered, wondering who, or what, had set that priceless thing into the skull of a flying lizard—and why.

It was the *why* that bothered him the most. Sun-stones are not mere adornments for wealthy ladies. They are rare, radioactive crystals, having a half-life one third greater than radium, and are used exclusively in the construction of delicate electronic devices dealing with frequencies above the first octave.

Most of that relatively unexplored super-

spectrum was still a mystery. And the strangely jewelled and collared creature circling above him filled Trevor with a vast unease.

It was not hunting. It did not wish to kill him. But it made no move to go away.

From far down the valley, muted by distance to a solemn bell note that rolled between the cliffs, Trevor heard the booming of a great song.

A sudden desire for concealment sent him in among the trees. He worked his way along the shore of the lake. Looking up through the branches he saw the black wings lift and turn, following him.

The lizard was watching him with its bright, sharp eyes. It noted the path of his movements through the ferns and flowers, as a hawk watches a rabbit.

He reached the lip of the basin where the water poured over in a cataract several hundred feet high. Climbing around the shoulder of a rocky bastion, Trevor had his first clear look at the valley.

Much of it was still vague with mist. But it was broad and deep, with a sweep of level plain and clumps of forest, locked tight between the barrier mountains. And as he made out other details, Trevor's astonishment grew out of all measure.

The land was under cultivation. There were clusters of thatched huts among the fields, and in the distance was a rock-built city, immense and unmistakable in the burning haze of dawn.

Trevor crouched there, staring, and the winged lizard swung in lazy circles, watching, waiting, while he tried to think.

A fertile valley such as this was rare enough in itself. But to find fields and a city was beyond belief. He had seen the aboriginal tribes that haunt some of the cliff-locked worlds of the Twilight Belt—sub-human peoples who live precariously among the bitter rocks and boiling springs, hunting the great lizards for food. None of this was ever built by them.

Unless, in this environment, they had advanced beyond the Age of Stone . . .

The gong sounded again its deep challenging note. Trevor saw the tiny figures of mounted men, no larger than ants at that distance, come down from the city and ride out across the plain.

Relief and joy supplanted speculation in Trevor's mind. He was battered and starving, lost on an alien world, and anything remotely approaching the human and the civilized was better luck than he could have dreamed or prayed for.

Besides, there were sun-stones in this place. He looked hungrily at the head of the circling watcher, and then began to scramble down the broken outer face of the bastion.

The black wings slipped silently after him down the sky.

ABOUT a hundred feet above the valley floor he came to an overhang. There was no way past it but to jump. He clung to a bush and let himself down as far as he could, and then dropped some four or five yards to a slope of springy turf. The fall knocked the wind out of him, and as he lay gasping a chill doubt crept into his mind.

He could see the land quite clearly now, the pattern of the fields, the far-off city. Except for the group of riders, nothing stirred. The fields, the plain were empty of life, the little villages still as death. And he saw, swinging lazily above a belt of trees by the river, a second black-winged shadow, watching.

The trees were not far away. The riders were coming toward them and him. It seemed to Trevor now that the men were perhaps a party of hunters, but there was something alarming about the utter disappearance of all other life. It was as though the gong had been a warning for all to take cover while the hunt was abroad.

The sharp-eyed lizards were the hounds that went before to find and flush the game. Glancing up at the ominous sentinel above his own head, Trevor had a great desire to see what the quarry was that hid in the belt of trees.

There was no way back to the partial security of the lake basin. The overhang cut him off from that. The futility of trying to hide was apparent, but nevertheless he wormed in among some crimson ferns. The city was at his left. To the right, the fertile plain washed out into a badland of lava and shattered rock, which narrowed and vanished around a shoulder of purple basalt. This defile was still in deep shadow.

The riders were still far away. He saw

them splash across a ford, toy figures making little bursts of spray.

The watcher above the trees darted suddenly downward. The quarry was breaking cover.

Trevor's suspicions crystallized into an ugly certainty. Horror-struck, he watched the bronzed, half-naked figure of a girl emerge from the brilliant undergrowth and run like an antelope toward the badland.

The flying lizard rose, swooped, and struck.

The girl flung herself aside. She carried a length of sapling bound with great thorns, and she lashed out with it at the black brute, grazed it, and ran on.

The lizard circled and came at her again from behind.

She turned. There was a moment of vicious confusion, in which the leathery wings enveloped her in a kind of dreadful cloak, and then she was running again, but less swiftly, and Trevor could see the redness of blood on her body.

And again the flying demon came.

The thing was trying to head her, turn her back toward the huntsmen. But she would not be turned. She beat with her club at the lizard, and ran, and fell, and ran again. And Trevor knew that she was beaten. The brute would have the life out of her before she reached the rocks.

Every dictate of prudence told Trevor to stay out of this. Whatever was going on was obviously the custom of the country, and none of his business. All he wanted was to get hold of one of these sun-stones and then find a way out of this valley. That was going to be trouble enough without taking on any more.

But prudence was swept away in the fury that rose in him as he saw the hawk swoop down again, with its claws outspread and hungry for the girl's tormented flesh. He sprang up, shouting to her to fight, to hang on, and went running full speed down the slope toward her.

She turned upon him a face of such wild, fierce beauty as he had never seen, the eyes dark and startled and full of a terrible determination. Then she screamed at him, in his own tongue, "*Look out!*"

He had forgotten his own nemesis. Black wings, claws, the lash of a scaly tail striking

like a whip, and Trevor went down, rolling over and staining the turf red as he rolled.

From far off he heard the voices of the huntsmen, shrill and strident, lifted in a wild halloo.

II

FOR some reason the assault steadied Trevor. He got to his feet and took the club out of the girl's hands, regretting the gun that was buried under a ton of rock on the other side of the mountains.

"Keep behind me," he said. "Watch my back."

She stared at him strangely, but there was no time for questions. They began to run together toward the badland. It seemed a long way off. The lizards screamed and hissed above them. Trevor hefted the club. It was about the size and weight of a baseball bat. He had once been very good at baseball.

"They're coming," said the girl.

"Lie down flat," he told her, and went on, more slowly. She dropped behind him in the grass, her fingers closing over a fragment of stone. The wide wings whistled down.

Trevor braced himself. He could see the evil eyes, yellow and bright as the golden collars, and the brilliant flash of the sun-stones against the jetty scales of the head. They were attacking together, but at different angles, so that he could not face them both.

He chose the one that was going to reach him first, and waited. He let it get close, very close, diving swiftly with its scarlet tongue forking out of its hissing mouth and its sharp claws spread. Then he swung the club with all his might.

It connected. He felt something break. The creature screamed, and then the force of its dive carried it on into him and he lost his footing in a welter of thrashing wings and floundering body. He fell, and the second lizard was on him.

The girl rose. In three long strides she reached him and flung herself upon the back of the scaly thing that ravaged him. He saw her trying to pin it to the ground, hammering methodically at its head with the stone.

He kicked off the wounded one. He had

broken its neck, but it was in no hurry to die. He caught up the club and presently the second brute was dead. Trevor found it quite easy to pick up the sun-stone.

He held it in his hand, a strange, tawny, jewel-like thing, with a scrap of bone still clinging to it. It glinted with inner fires, deep and subtle, and an answering spark of wild excitement was kindled in Trevor from the very touch and feel of it, so that he forgot where he was or what he was doing, forgot everything but the eerie crystal that gleamed against his palm.

It was more than a jewel, more even than wealth, that he held there. It was hope and success and a new life.

He had thrown years away prospecting the bitter Mercurian wastes. This trip had been his last gamble, and it had ended with his ship gone, his quest finished, and nothing to look forward to even if he did get back safely, but to become one of the penniless, aging planet-drifters he'd always pitied.

Now all that was changed. This single stone would let him go back to Earth a winner and not a failure. It would pay off all the dreary, lonesome, hazardous years. It would . . .

It would do so many things if he could get out of this God-forsaken valley with it! If!

The girl had got her breath again. Now she said urgently, "Come! They're getting near!"

Trevor's senses, bemused by the sun-stone, registered only vaguely the external stimuli of sight and sound. The riders had come closer. The beasts they rode were taller and sligher than horses. They were not hooved, but clawed. They had narrow, vicious-looking heads with spiny crests that stood up erect and arrogant. They came fast, carrying their riders lightly.

The men were still too far away to distinguish features, but even at that distance Trevor sensed something peculiar about their faces, something unnatural. They wore splendid harness, and their half-clad bodies were bronzed, but not nearly so deeply as the girl's.

The girl shook him furiously, stirring him out of his dream. "Do you want to be taken alive? Before, the beasts would have torn us

apart, and that is quickly over. But we killed the hawks, don't you understand? Now they will take us alive!"

He did not understand in the least, but her obvious preference for a very nasty death instead of capture made him find reserves of strength he thought he had lost in the underground river. There was also the matter of the sun-stone. If they caught him with it they would want it back.

Clutching the precious thing he turned with the girl and ran.

THE lava bed was beginning to catch the sun now. The splintered rock showed through, bleak and ugly. The badland and the defile beyond seemed like an entrance into hell, but it did offer shelter of a sort if they could make it.

The drumming of padded feet behind was loud in his ears. He glanced over his shoulder, once. He could see the faces of the huntsmen now. They were not good faces, in either feature or expression, and he saw the thing about them that he had noticed before, the unnatural thing.

In the center of each forehead, above the eyes, a sun-stone was set into flesh and bone.

First the hawk-lizards, and now these . . .

Trevor's heart contracted with an icy pang. These men were human, as human as himself, and yet they were not. They were alien and wicked and altogether terrifying, and he began to understand why the girl did not wish to come alive into their hands.

Fleet, implacable, the crested mounts with their strange riders were sweeping in upon the two who fled. The leader took from about his saddle a curved throwing stick and held it, poised. The sun-stone set in his brow flashed like a third, and evil eye.

The lava and the fangs of rock shimmered in the light. Trevor yearned toward them. The brown girl running before him seemed to shimmer also. It hurt very much to breathe. He thought he could not go any farther. But he did, and when the girl faltered he put his arm around her and steadied her on.

He continued to keep an eye out behind him. He saw the curved stick come hurtling toward him and he managed to let it go by. The others were ready now as they came within range. It seemed to Trevor that they

were watching him with a peculiar intensity, as though they had recognized him as a stranger and had almost forgotten the girl in their desire to take him.

His bare feet trod on lava already growing hot under the sun. A spur of basalt reared up and made a shield against the throwing sticks. In a minute or two Trevor and the girl were hidden in a terrain of such broken roughness as the man had seldom seen. It was as though some demoniac giant had whipped the molten lava with a pudding-spoon, cracking mountains with his free hand and tossing in the pieces. He understood now why the girl had waited for daylight to make her break. To attempt this passage in the dark would be suicidal.

He listened nervously for sounds of pursuit. He could not hear any, but he remained uneasy, and when the girl flung herself down to rest, he asked,

"Shouldn't we go farther? They might still come."

She did not answer him at once, beyond a shake of the head. He realized that she was looking at him almost as intently as the riders had. It was the first chance she had had to examine him, and she was making the most of it. She noted the cut of his hair, the stubble of beard, the color and texture of his skin, the rags of his shorts that were all he had to cover him. Very carefully she noted them, and then she said in an odd slow voice, as though she were thinking of something else,

"Mounted, the Korins are afraid of nothing. But afoot, and in here, they are afraid of ambush. It has happened before. They can die, you know, just the same as we do."

Her face, for all its youth, was not the face of a girl. It was a woman who looked at Trevor, a woman who had already learned the happy, the passionate, and the bitter things, who had lived with pain and fear and knew better than to trust anyone but herself.

"You aren't one of us," she said.

"No. I came from beyond the mountains." He could not tell whether she believed him or not. "Who, or what, are the Korins?"

"The lords of Korith," she answered, and began to tear strips from the length of white linen cloth she wore twisted about her waist. "There will be time to talk later. We still

have far to go. Here, this will stop the bleeding."

In silence they bound each other's wounds and started off again. If Trevor had not been so unutterably weary, and the way so hard, he would have been angry with the girl. And yet there was nothing really to be angry about except that he sensed she was somehow suspicious of him.

Many times they had to stop and rest. Once he asked her, "Why were they—the Korins—hunting you?"

"I was running away. Why were they hunting you?"

"Damned if I know. Accident, perhaps. I happened to be where their hawks were flying."

The girl wore a chain of iron links around her neck, a solid chain with no clasp, too small to be pulled over the head. From it hung a round tag with a word stamped on it. Trevor took the tag in his hand.

"Galt," he read. "Is that your name?"

"My name is Jen. Galt is the Korin I belong to. He led the hunt." She gave Trevor a look of fierce and challenging pride and said, as though she were revealing a secret earldom, "I am a slave."

"How long have you been in the valley, Jen? You and I are the same stock, speaking the same language. Earth stock. How does it happen, a colony of this size that no one ever heard of?"

"It's been nearly three hundred years since the Landing," she answered. "I have been told that for generations my people kept alive the hope that a ship would come from Earth and release them from the Korins. It never came. And, except by ship, there is no way in or out of the valley."

Trevor glanced at her sharply. "I found a way in, all right, and I'm beginning to wish I hadn't. And if there's no way out, where are we going?"

"I don't know myself," said Jen, and rose. "But my man came this way, and others before him."

She went on, and Trevor went with her. There was no place else to go.

The heat was unbearable, and they crept in the shadows of the rocks wherever they could. They suffered from thirst, but there was no water. The shoulder of purple basalt loomed impossibly tall before them, and

seemed never to grow nearer.

For most of the day they toiled across the lava bed, and at last, when they had almost forgotten that they had ever dreamed of doing it, they rounded the shoulder and came staggering out of the badland into a narrow canyon that seemed like the scar of some cataclysmic wound in the mountain.

Rock walls, raw and riven, rose out of sight on either side, the twisted strata showing streaks of crimson and white and sullen ochre. A little stream crawled in a stony bed, and not much grew beside it.

Jen and Trevor fell by the stream. And while they were still sprawled on the moist gravel, lapping like dogs at the bitter water, men came quietly from among the rocks and stood above them, holding weapons made of stone.

TREVOR got slowly to his feet. There were six of these armed men. Like the girl, they wore loin cloths of white cotton, much frayed, and like her they were burned almost black by a lifetime of exposure to a brutal sun. They were all young, knotted and sinewy from hard labor, their faces grim beyond their years. All bore upon their bodies the scars of talons. And they looked at Trevor with a cold, strange look.

They knew Jen, or most of them did. She called them gladly by name, and demanded, "Hugh. Where is Hugh?"

One of them nodded toward the farther wall. "Up there in the caves. He's all right. Who is this man, Jen?"

She turned to study Trevor.

"I don't know. They were hunting him, too. He came to help me. I couldn't have escaped without him. He killed the hawks. But . . ." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "He says he came from beyond the mountains. He knows of Earth and speaks our tongue. And when he killed the hawks he smashed the skull of one and took the sun-stone."

All six started at that. And the tallest of them, a young man with a face as bleak and craggy as the rocks around them, came toward Trevor.

"Why did you take the sun-stone?" he asked. His voice held an ugly edge.

Trevor stared at him. "Why the devil do you suppose? Because it's valuable."

The man held out his hand. "Give it to me."

"The hell I will!" cried Trevor furiously. He backed away, just a little, getting set.

The young man came on, and his face was dark and dangerous.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen.

Saul didn't wait. He kept right on coming. Trevor let him get close before he swung, and he put every ounce of his strength behind the blow.

The smashing fist took Saul squarely in the belly and sent him backward, doubled up. Trevor stood with hunched shoulders, breathing hard, watching the others with feral eyes.

"What are you?" he snarled. "A bunch of thieves? All right, come on! I got that stone the hard way and I'm going to keep it!"

Big words. A big anger. And a big fear behind them. The men were around him in a ring now. There was no chance of breaking away. Even if he did he was so winded they could pull him down in minutes. The stone weighed heavy in his pocket, heavy as half a lifetime of sweat and hunger and hard work, on the rockpiles of Mercury.

Saul straightened up. His face was still gray, but he bent again and picked up a sharp-pointed implement of rock that he had dropped. Then he moved forward. And the others closed in, at the same time, quite silently.

There was a bitter taste in Trevor's mouth as he waited for them. To get his hands on a sun-stone at last, and then to lose it and probably his life too, to this crowd of savages! It was more than anybody ought to be asked to bear.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen again, pushing in front of him. "He saved my life! You can't just . . ."

"He's a Korin. A spy."

"He can't be! There's no stone in his forehead. Not even a scar."

Saul's voice was flat and relentless. "He took a sun-stone. Only a Korin would touch one of the cursed things."

"But he says he's from outside the valley! From Earth, Saul. From *Earth*! Things would be different there."

Jen's insistence on that point had at least halted the men temporarily. And Trevor,

looking at Saul's face, had suddenly begun to understand something.

"You think the sun-stones are evil," he said.

Saul gave him a sombre glance. "They are. And the one you have is going to be destroyed. Now."

Trevor swallowed the bitter anguish that choked him, and did some fast thinking. If the sun-stones had a superstitious significance in this benighted pocket of Mercury—and he could imagine why they might, with those damned unnatural hawks flying around with the equally unnatural Korins—that put a different light on their attitude.

He knew just by looking at their faces that it was "give them the sun-stone or die." Dying at the hands of a bunch of wild fanatics didn't make sense. Better let them have the stone and gamble on getting it back again later. Or on getting another one. They seemed plentiful enough in the valley!

Sure, let's be sensible about it. Let's hand over a lifetime of hoping to a savage with horny palms, and not worry about it. Let's . . . Oh, hell.

"Here," he said. "All right. Take it."

It hurt. It hurt like giving up his own heart.

Saul took it without thanks. He turned and laid it on a flat surface of rock, and began to pound the glinting crystal with the heavy stone he had meant to use on Trevor's head. There was a look on his lined, young, craggy face as though he was killing a living thing—a thing that he feared and hated.

Trevor shivered. He knew that sun-stones were impervious to anything but atomic bombardment. But it made him a little sick, none the less, to see that priceless object being battered by a crude stone club.

"It won't break," he said. "You might as well stop."

SAUL flung down his weapon so close to Trevor's bare feet that he leaped back. Then he picked up the sun-stone and hurled it as far as he could across the ravine. Trevor heard it clicking faintly as it fell, in among the rocks and rubble at the foot of the opposite cliff. He strained to mark the spot.

"You idiot!" he said to Saul. "You've thrown away a fortune. The fortune I've

spent my life trying to find. What's the matter with you? Don't you have any idea at all what those things are worth?"

Saul ignored him, speaking bleakly to the others. "No man with a sun-stone is to be trusted. I say kill him."

Jen said stubbornly, "No, Saul. I owe him my life."

"But he could be a slave, a traitor, working for the Korins."

"Look at his clothes," said Jen. "Look at his skin. This morning it was white, now it's red. Did you ever see a slave that color? Or a Korin, either. Besides, did you ever see him in the valley before? There aren't as many of us as that."

"We can't take any chances," Saul said. "Not us."

"You can always kill him later. But if he is from beyond the mountains, perhaps even from Earth—" She said the word hesitantly, as though she did not quite believe there was such a place. "He might know some of the things we've been made to forget. He might help us. Anyway, the others have a right to their say before you kill him."

Saul shook his head. "I don't like it. But—" He hesitated, scowling thoughtfully. "All right. We'll settle it up in the cave. Let's move." He said to Trevor, "You go in the middle of us. And if you try to signal anyone . . ."

"Who the devil would I signal to?" retorted Trevor angrily. "Listen, I'm sorry I ever got into your bloody valley."

But he was not sorry. Not quite.

His senses were on the alert to mark every twist and turn of the way they went, the way that would bring him back to the sun-stone. The ravine narrowed and widened and twisted, but there was only one negotiable path, and that was beside the stream bed. This went on for some distance, and then the ravine split on a tremendous cliff of bare rock that tilted up and back as though arrested in the act of falling over. The stream flowed from the left-hand fork. Saul took the other one.

They kept close watch on Trevor as he slipped and clambered and sprawled along with them. The detritus of the primeval cataclysm that had shaped this crack in the mountains lay where it had fallen, growing rougher and more dangerous with every

eroding storm and cracking frost.

Above him, on both sides, the mountain tops went up and still up, beyond the shallow atmosphere. Their half-seen summits leaned and quivered like things glimpsed from under water, lit like torches by the naked blaze of the sun. There were ledges, lower down. Trevor saw men crouched upon them, among heaps of piled stones. They shouted, and Saul answered them. In this narrow throat no man could get through alive if they chose to stop him.

After a while they left the floor of the ravine and climbed a path, partly natural and partly so roughly hewn that it seemed natural. It angled steeply up the cliff face, and at its end was a narrow hole. Saul led the way through it. In single file the others followed, and Trevor heard Jen's voice echoing in some great hollow space beyond, calling Hugh.

There was a cave inside, a very large cave with dim nooks and crannies around its edges. Shafts of sunlight pierced it here and there from cracks in the cliff face high above, and far at the back of it, where the floor tipped sharply down, a flame burned. Trevor had seen flames like that before on Mercury, where volcanic gases blowing up through a fissure had ignited from some chance spark. It was impressive, a small bluish column twisting upward into rock-curtained distance and roaring evilly. He could feel the air rush past him as the burning pillar sucked it in.

There were people in the cave. Less than a hundred, Trevor thought, not counting a handful of children and striplings. Less than a third of those were women. They all bore the same unmistakable stamp. Hard as life must be for them in the cave, it had been harder before.

He felt his legs buckling under him with sheer weariness. He stood groggily with his back against the rough cave wall.

A stocky young man with knotted shoulder-muscles and sun-bleached hair was holding Jen in his arms. That would be Hugh. He, and the others, were shouting excitedly, asking and answering questions.

Then, one by one, they caught sight of Trevor. And gradually a silence grew and spread.

"All right," said Saul harshly, looking at Trevor. "Let's get this settled."

"You settle it," said Trevor. "I'm tired." He glared at Saul and the unfriendly staring crowd, and they seemed to rock in his vision. "I'm an Earthman. I didn't want to come into your damned valley, and I've been here a night and a day and haven't slept. I'm going to sleep."

Saul started to speak again but Jen's man, Hugh, came up and stood in front of him.

"He saved Jen's life," Hugh said. "Let him sleep."

He led Trevor away to a place at the side where there were heaps of dried vines and mountain creepers, prickly and full of dust but softer than the cave floor. Trevor managed a few vague words of thanks and was asleep before they were out of his mouth.

Hours, weeks, or perhaps it was only minutes later, a rough persistent shaking brought him to again. Faces bent over him. He saw them through a haze, and the questions they asked penetrated to him slowly, and without much meaning.

"Why did you want the sun-stone?"

"Why wouldn't I want it? I could take it back to Earth and sell it for a fortune."

"What do they do with sun-stones on Earth?"

"Build gadgets, super-electronic, to study things. Wave-lengths too short for anything else to pick up. Thought-waves, even. What do you care?"

"Do they wear sun-stones in their foreheads, on Earth?"

"No . . ." His voice trailed off, and the voices, or the dream of voices, left him.

It was still daylight when he woke, this time normally. He sat up, feeling stiff and sore but otherwise rested. Jen came to him, smiling, and thrust a chunk of what he recognized as some species of rock-lizard into his hands. He gnawed at it wolfishly while she talked, having discovered that this was not the same day, but the next one, and quite late.

"They have decided," she said, "to let you live."

"I imagine you had a lot to do with that. Thanks."

She shrugged her bare shoulders, with the raw wounds on them where the hawk-lizards had clawed her. She had that exhausted, let-down look that comes after tremendous stress, and her eyes, even while she spoke

to Trevor, followed Hugh as he worked at some task around the cave.

"I couldn't have done anything if they hadn't believed your story," she told him. "They questioned you when you were too far gone to lie." He had a very dim memory of that. "They didn't understand your answers but they knew they were true ones. Also they examined your clothes. No cloth like that is woven in the valley. And the things that hold them together—" he knew she meant the zippers "—are unknown to us. So you must have come from beyond the mountains. They want to know exactly how, and if you could get back the same way."

"No," said Trevor, and explained. "Am I free to move around, then—go where I want to?"

She studied him a moment before she spoke. "You're a stranger. You don't belong with us. You could betray us to the Korins just as easily as not."

"Why would I do that? They hunted me, too."

"For sun-stones, perhaps. You're a stranger. They would take you alive. Anyway, be careful. Be very careful what you do."

From outside came a cry. "Hawks! Take cover, hawks!"

III

INSTANTLY everyone in the cave fell silent. They watched the places in the cave wall where the sunlight came in, the little cracks in the cliff face. Trevor thought of the hawk-creatures, and how they would be wheeling and slipping along the ravine, searching.

Outside, the rough rock looked all alike. He thought that in that immensity of erosions and crevices they would have a hard time finding the few tiny chinks that led into the cave. But he watched, too, tense with a feeling of danger.

No sound at all came now from the ravine. In that utter stillness, the frightened whimper of a child came with the sudden loudness of a scream. It was instantly hushed. The shafts of sunlight crept slowly up the walls. Jen seemed not to breathe. Her eyes shone, like an animal's.

A black shadow flickered across one of the sunlight bars—flickered, and then was

gone. Trevor's heart turned over. He waited for it to come back, to occlude that shaft of light, to slip in along it and become a wide-winged demon with a sun-stone in its brow. For a whole eternity he waited, but it didn't come back, and then a man crept in through the entry hole and said, "They're gone."

Jen put her head down on her knees. She had begun to tremble all over, very quietly, but with spasmodic violence. Before Trevor could reach her, Hugh had her in his arms, talking to her, soothing her. She began to sob then, and Hugh glanced at Trevor across her shoulders.

"She's had a little too much."

"Yes." Trevor looked at the shafts of sunlight. "Do the hawks come very often?"

"They send them every once in a while hoping to catch us off guard. If they could find the cave they could hunt us out of it, drive us back into the valley. So far they haven't found it."

Jen was quiet now. Hugh stroked her with big awkward hands. "She told you, I guess. About yourself, I mean. You've got to be careful."

"Yes," said Trevor. "She told me." He leaned forward. "Listen, I still don't know how you people got here or what it's all about. After we got away from the Korins, Jen said something about a landing, three hundred years ago. Three hundred Earth years?"

"About that. Some of us have remembered enough to keep track."

"The first Earth colonies were being started on Mercury about then, in two or three of the bigger valleys. Mining colonies. Was this one of them?"

Hugh shook his head. "No. The story is that there was a big ship loaded with people from Earth. That's true, of course, because the ship is still here, what's left of it. And so are we. Some of the people on the ship were settlers and some were convicts."

He pronounced the word with the same hatred and scorn that always accompanied the name "Korin." Trevor said eagerly,

"They used to do that in the early days. Use convict labor in the mines. It made so much trouble they had to stop it. Were the Korins . . . ?"

"They were the convicts. The big ship crashed in the valley but most of the people

weren't killed. After the crash the convicts killed the men who were in charge of the ship, and made the settlers obey them. That's how it all started. And that's why we're proud we're slaves—because we're descended from the settlers."

Trevor could see the picture quite clearly now, the more so because it had happened before in one way or another. The emigrant ship bound for one of the colonies, driven off its course by the tremendous magnetic disturbances that still made Mercury a space-man's nightmare.

They couldn't even have called for help or given their position. The terrible nearness of the Sun made any form of radio communication impossible. And then the convicts had broken free and killed the officers, finding themselves unexpectedly in command of a sort of paradise, with the settlers to serve them.

A fairly safe paradise, too. Mercury has an infinite number of these Twilight valleys, all looking more or less alike from space, half hidden under their shallow blankets of air, and only the few that are both accessible and unmistakable because of their size have permanent colonies. Straight up and down, by spaceship, is the only way in or out of most of them, and unless a ship should land directly on them by sheer chance, the erstwhile prisoners would be safe from discovery.

"But the sun-stones?" asked Trevor, touching his forehead. "What about the sun-stones and the hawks? They didn't have the use of them when they landed."

"No, they came later." Hugh looked around uneasily. "Look, Trevor, it's a thing we don't talk about much. You can see why, when you think what it's done to us. And it's a thing you shouldn't talk about at all."

"But how did they get them in their heads? And why? Especially, why do they waste them on the hawks?"

JEN glanced at him somberly from the circle of Hugh's arm. "We don't know, exactly. But the hawks are the eyes and ears of the Korins. And from the time they used the first sun-stone we've had no hope of getting free from them."

The thing that had been buried in Trevor's subconscious since last night's ques-

tioning came suddenly to the surface.

"Thought-waves, that's it! Sure!" He leaned forward excitedly, and Jen told him frantically to lower his voice. "I'll be damned. They've been experimenting with sun-stones for years on Earth—ever since they were discovered, but the scientists never thought of . . ."

"Do they have the stones on Earth, too?" asked Jen, with loathing.

"No, no, only the ones that are brought from Mercury. Something about Mercury being so close to the Sun, overdose of solar radiation and the extremes of heat, cold, and pressure while the planet was being made, that formed that particular kind of crystal here. I guess that's why they're called sun-stones."

He shook his head. "So that's how they work it—direct mental communication between the Korins and the hawks, by means of the stones. Simple, too. Set them right in the skull, almost in contact with the brain, and you don't need all the complicated machines and senders and receivers they've been monkeying with in the labs for so long." He shivered. "I'll admit I don't like the idea, though. There's something repulsive about it."

Hugh said bitterly, "When they were only men, and convicts, we might have beaten them some day, even though they had all the weapons. But when they became the Korins—" He indicated the darkling alcoves of the cave. "This is the only freedom we can ever have now."

Looking at Hugh and Jen, Trevor felt a great welling-up of pity, for them, and for all these far-removed children of Earth who were now only hunted slaves to whom this burrow in the rock meant freedom. He thought with pure hatred of the Korins who hunted them, with the uncanny hawks that were their far-ranging eyes and ears and weapons. He wished he could hit them with . . .

He caught himself up sharply. Letting his sympathies run away with him wasn't going to do anybody any good. The only thing that concerned him was to get hold of that sun-stone again and get out of this devil's pocket. He'd spent half a life hunting for a stone, and he wasn't going to let concern over perfect strangers sidetrack him now.

The first step would be getting away from the cave.

It would have to be at night. No watch was kept then on the ledges, for the hawks did not fly in darkness, and the Korins never moved without the hawks. Most of the people were busy in those brief hours of safety. The women searched for edible moss and lichens. Some of the men brought water from the stream at the canyon fork, and others, with stone clubs and crude spears, hunted the great rock-lizards that slept in the crevices, made sluggish by the cold.

Trevor waited until the fourth night, and then when Saul's water party left, he started casually out of the cave after them.

"I think I'll go down with them," he told Jen and Hugh. "I haven't been down that far since I got here."

There seemed to be no suspicion in them of his purpose. Jen said, "Stay close to the others. It's easy to get lost in the rocks."

He turned and went into the darkness after the water party. He followed them down to the fork, and it was quite easy then to slip aside among the tumbled rock and leave them, working his way slowly and silently downstream.

After several days in the dimness of the cave, he found that the star-shine gave him light enough to move by. It was hard going, even so, and by the time he reached the approximate place where Saul had tried to kill him he was bruised and cut and considerably shaken. But he picked his spot carefully, crossed the stream, and began to search.

The chill deepened. The rocks that had been hot under his hands turned cold, and the frost-rime settled lightly on them, and Trevor shivered and swore and scrambled, fighting the numbness out of his body, praying that none of the loose rubble would fall on him and crush him. He had prospected on Mercury for a long time. Otherwise he would not have lived.

HE FOUND it more easily than he could have done by day, without a detector. He saw the cold pale light of it gleaming, down among the dark broken rock where Saul had thrown it.

He picked it up.

He dandled the thing in his palm, touching it with loving finger tips. It

had a certain cold repellent beauty, glimmering in the darkness—a freakish by-product of Mercury's birth-pangs, unique in the Solar System. Its radioactivity was a type and potency harmless to living tissue, and its wonderful sensitivity had made it possible for physicists to explore at least a little into those unknown regions above the first octave.

In a gesture motivated by pure curiosity he lifted the stone and pressed it tight against the flesh between his brows. Probably it wouldn't work this way. Probably it had to be set deep into the bone . . .

It worked, oh God, it worked, and something had him, something caught him by the naked brain and would not let him go.

Trevor screamed. The thin small sound was lost in the empty dark, and he tried again, but no sound would come. Something had forbidden him to scream. Something was in there, opening out the leaves of his brain like the pages of a child's book, and it wasn't a hawk, or a Korin. It wasn't anything human or animal that he had ever known before. It was something still and lonely and remote, as alien as the mountain peaks that towered upward to the stars, and as strong, and as utterly without mercy.

Trevor's body became convulsed. Every physical instinct was driving him to run, to escape, and he could not. In his throat now there was a queer wailing whimper. He tried to drop the sun-stone. He was forbidden. Rage began to come on the heels of horror, a blind protest against the indecent invasion of his most private mind. The whimpering rose to a sort of catlike squall, an eerie and quite insane sound in the narrow gorge, and he clawed with his free hand at the one that held the sun-stone, tight against his brows.

He tore it loose.

A wrench that almost cracked his brain in two. A flicker of surprise, just before the contact broke, and then a fading flash of anger, and then nothing.

Trevor fell down. He did not quite lose consciousness, but there was an ugly sickness in him and all his bones had turned to water. It seemed a long time before he could get to his feet again. Then he stood there shaking.

There was something in this accursed valley. There was something or someone who

could reach out through the sun-stones and take hold of a man's mind. It did that to the Korins and the hawks, and it had done it for a moment to him, and the horror of that alien grasp upon his brain was still screaming inside him.

"But who—?" he whispered hoarsely. And then he knew that the word was wrong. "*What—?*"

For it was not human, it couldn't be human, whatever had held him there wasn't man or woman, brute or human. It was something else, but what it was he didn't want to know, he only wanted to get out—out—

Trevor found that he had begun to run, bruising his shins against rocks. He got a grip on himself, forcing himself to stand still. His breath was coming in great gasps.

He still had the sun-stone clenched in his sweating palm, and he had an almost irresistible desire to fling the thing away with all his strength. But even in the grip of alien horror a man could not throw away the goal of half a lifetime, and he held it, and hated it.

He told himself that whatever it was that reached through the sun-stones could not use them unless they were against the forehead, close to the brain. The thing couldn't harm him if he kept it away from his head.

A terrible thought renewed Trevor's horror. He thought of the Korins, the men who wore sun-stones set forever in their brows. Were they, always and always, in the icy, alien grip of that which had held him? And these were the masters of Jen's people?

He forced that thought away. He had to forget everything except how to get free of this place.

He started at once, still shaken. He couldn't go far before daylight, and he would have to lie up in the rocks through the day and try to make it to the valley wall the next night.

He was glad when daylight came, the first fires of sunrise kindling the peaks that went above the sky.

IT WAS at that moment that a shadow flickered, and Trevor looked up and saw the hawks.

Many hawks. They had not seen him, they were not heeding the rocks in which

he crouched. They were flying straight up the ravine, not circling or searching now but going with a sure purposefulness, back the way he had come.

He watched them uneasily. There were more than he had ever seen together before. But they flew on up the ravine without turning, and were gone.

"They weren't looking for me," he thought. "But . . ."

Trevor should have felt relieved, but he didn't. His uneasiness grew and grew, stemming from an inescapable conclusion.

The hawks were going to the cave. They were heading toward it in an exact line, turning neither to right nor left, and this time they were not in any doubt. They, or whoever or whatever dominated them, knew this time exactly where to find the fugitives.

"But that's impossible," Trevor tried to tell himself. "There's no way they could suddenly learn exactly where the cave is after all this time."

No way?

A thing was forcing its way up into Trevor's anxious thoughts, a realization that he did not want to look at squarely, not at all. But it would not be put down, it would not stop tormenting him, and suddenly he cried out to it, a cry of pain and guilt,

"No, it couldn't be! It couldn't be through me they learned!"

It fronted him relentlessly, the memory of that awful moment in the canyon when whatever had gripped him through the sun-stone had seemed to be turning over the leaves of his brain like the pages of a book.

The vast and alien mind that had gripped him in that dreadful contact had read his own brain clearly, he knew. And in Trevor's brain and memories it had found the secret of the cave.

Trevor groaned in an agony of guilt.

He crawled out of his rock-heap and began to run back up the ravine, following the path the hawks had taken. There might still be time to warn them.

Stumbling, running, he passed the canyon fork. And now from above him in the canyon he heard the sounds he dreaded—the sounds of women screaming and men shouting hoarsely in fury and despair. Farther on, over the rocks, scrambling, slipping, gasping for breath, he came to the

cave-mouth and the sight he had dreaded.

The hawks had gone into the cave and driven out the slaves. They had them in the canyon now, and they were trying to herd them together and drive them down toward the lava beds. But the slaves were fighting back.

Dark wings beat and thundered in the narrow gorge between the walls of rock. Claws struck and lashing tails cut like whips. Men struggled and floundered and trampled each other. Some died. Some of the hawks died too. But the people were being forced farther down the canyon under the relentless swooping of the hawks.

Then Trevor saw Jen. She was a little way from the others. Hugh was with her. He had shoved her into a protecting hollow and was standing over her with a piece of rock in his hands, trying to beat off a hawk. Hugh was hurt badly. He was not doing well.

Trevor uttered a wild cry that voiced all the futile rage in him, and bounded over a slope toward them.

"Hugh, look out!" he yelled. The hawk had risen, and then had checked and turned, to swoop down straight at Hugh's back.

Hugh swung partly around, but not soon enough. The hawk's claws were in his body, deep. Hugh fell down.

Jen was screaming when Trevor reached them. He didn't stop to snatch up a rock. He threw himself onto the hawk that had welded itself to Hugh's back. There was a horrid slippery thrashing of wings under him, and the scaly neck of the thing was terribly strong between Trevor's hands. But not strong enough. He broke it.

It was too late. When his sight cleared, Jen was staring in a strange wild way at the man and hawk lying tangled together in the dust. When Trevor touched her she fought him a little, not as though she saw him really, not as though she saw anything but Hugh's white ribs sticking out.

"Jen, for God's sake, he's dead." Trevor tried to pull her away. "We've got to get away from here."

There might be a chance. The black hawks were driving the humans down the canyon a little below them now, and if they could make the tumbled rocks below the cliff, there was a chance.

IV

HE HAD to drag Jen. Her face had gone utterly blank.

In the next minute he realized that they would never reach the rocks, and that there was no chance, none at all. Back from the winged whirl that was driving the humans, two of the hawks came darting at them.

Trevor swung Jen behind him and hoped fiercely that he could get another neck between his hands before they pulled him down.

The dark shadows flashed down. He could see the sun-stones glittering in their heads. They struck straight at him . . .

But at the last split second they swerved away.

Trevor waited. They came back again, very fast, but this time it was at Jen they struck, and not at him.

He got her behind him again in time. And once more the hawks checked their strike.

The truth dawned on Trevor. The hawks were deliberately refraining from hurting him.

"Whoever gives them their orders, the Korins or that *Other*, doesn't want me hurt!"

He caught up Jen in his arms and started to run again toward the rocks.

Instantly the hawks struck at Jen. He could not swing her clear in time. Blood ran from the long claw-marks they left in her smooth, tanned shoulders.

Jen cried out. Trevor hesitated. He tried again for the rocks, and Jen moaned as a swift scaly head snapped at her neck.

So that's it, Trevor thought furiously. I'm not to be hurt, but they can drive me through Jen.

And they could, too. He would never get Jen to the concealment of the rocks alive, with those two wide-winged shadows tearing at her. He had to go the way they wanted or they would leave her as they had left Hugh.

"All right!" Trevor yelled savagely at the circling demons. "Let her alone! I'll go where you want."

He turned, still carrying Jen, plodding after the other slaves who were being herded down the canyon.

All that day the black hawks drove the humans down the watercourse, around the

shoulder of basalt and out onto the naked sun-seared lava bed. Some of them dropped and lay where they were, and no effort of the hawks could move them on again. Much of the time Trevor carried Jen. Part of the time he dragged her. For long vague periods he had no idea what he did.

He was in a daze in which only his hatred still was vivid, when he felt Jen pulled away from him. He struggled, and was held—and he looked up to see a ring of mounted men around him. Korins on their crested beasts, the sun-stones glittering in their brows.

They looked down at Trevor, curious, speculative, hostile, their otherwise undistinguished human faces made strangely evil and other-worldly by the winking stones.

"You come with us to the city," one of them said curtly to Trevor. "That woman goes with the other slaves."

Trevor glared up at him. "Why me, to the city?"

The Korin raised his riding whip threateningly. "Do as you're ordered! Mount!"

Trevor saw that a slave had brought a saddled beast to him and was holding it, not looking either at him or the Korins.

"All fight," he said. "I'll go with you."

He mounted and sat waiting, his eyes bright with the hatred that burned in him, bright as blown coals. They formed a circle around him and the leader gave a word. They galloped off toward the distant city.

Trevor must have dozed as he rode, for suddenly it was sunset, and they were approaching the city.

Seeing it as he had before, far off and with nothing to measure it against but the overtopping titan peaks, it had seemed no more than a city built of rock. Now he was close to it. Black shadows lay on it, and on the valley, but half way up the opposite mountain wall the light still blazed, reflected downward on the shallow sky, so that everything seemed to float in some curious dimension between night and day, Trevor stared, shut his eyes, and stared again.

The size was wrong.

He looked quickly at the Korins, with the eerie feeling that he might have shrunk to child-size as he slept. But they had not changed—at least, relative to himself. He turned back to the city, trying to force it

into perspective.

It rose up starkly from the level plain. There was no gradual guttering out into suburbs, no softening down to garden villas or rows of cottages. It leaped up like a cliff and began, solemn, massive, squat, and ugly. The buildings were square, set stiffly along a square front. They were not tall. Most of them were only one story high. And yet Trevor felt dwarfed by them, as he had never felt dwarfed by the mightiest of Earth's skyscrapers. It was an unnatural feeling, and one that made him curiously afraid.

There were no walls or gateways, no roads leading in. One minute the beasts padded on the grass of the open plain. The next, their claws were clicking on a stone pave and the buildings closed them in, hulking, graceless, looking sullen and forlorn in the shadowed light. There was no sound in them anywhere, no gleaming of lamps in the black embrasures of cavernous doors. The last furious glare of the hidden sun seeped down from the high peaks and stained their upper walls, and they were old—half as old, Trevor thought, as the peaks themselves.

It was the window embrasures, the doors, and the steps that led up to them that made Trevor understand suddenly what was wrong. And the latent fear that had been in him sprang to full growth. The city, and the buildings in it, the steps and the doors and the height of the windows, were perfectly in proportion, perfectly normal—if the people who lived there were twenty feet high.

He turned to the Korins. "You never built this place. Who built it?"

The one called Galt, who was nearest him, snarled, "Quiet, slave!"

Trevor looked at him, and at the other Korins. Something about their faces and the way they rode along the darkening empty street told him they too were afraid.

He said, "You, the Korins, the lordly demi-gods who ride about and send your hawks to hunt and slay—you're more afraid of your master than the slaves are of you!"

They turned toward him pallid faces that burned with hatred.

He remembered how that other had

gripped his brain back in the canyon. He remembered how it had felt. He understood many things now.

He asked, "How does it feel to be enslaved, Korins? Not just enslaved in body, but in mind and soul?"

Galt turned like a striking snake. But the blow never fell. The upraised hand with the heavy whip suddenly checked, and then sank down again. Only the eyes of the Korin glowed with a baleful helplessness under the winking sun-stone.

TREVOR laughed without humor. "It wants me alive. I guess I'm safe, then. I guess I could tell you what I think of you. You're still convicts, aren't you? After three hundred years. No wonder you hate the slaves."

Not the same convicts, of course. The sun-stones didn't give longevity. Trevor knew how the Korins propagated, stealing women from among the slaves, keeping the male children and killing the female. He laughed again.

"It isn't such a good life after all, is it, being a Korin? Even hunting and killing can't take the taste out of your mouths. No wonder you hate the others! They're enslaved, all right, but they're not *owned*."

They would have liked to kill him but they could not. They were forbidden. Trevor looked at them, in the last pale flicker of the afterglow. The jewels and the splendid harness, the bridles of the beasts heavy with gold, the weapons—they looked foolish now, like the paper crowns and glass beads that children deck themselves with when they pretend to be kings. These were not lords and masters. These were only little men, and slaves. And the sun-stones were a badge of shame.

The cavalcade passed on. Empty streets, empty houses with windows too high for human eyes to look through and steps too tall for human legs to climb. Full dark, and the first stunning crash of thunder, the first blaze of lightning between the cliffs. The mounts were hurrying now, almost galloping to beat the lightning and the scalding rain.

They were in a great square. Around it was a stiff rectangle of houses, and these were lighted with torchlight, and in the

monstrous doorways here and there a little figure stood, a Korin, watching.

In the exact center of the square was a flat low structure of stone, having no windows and but a single door.

They reined the beasts before that lightless entrance. "Get down," said Galt to Trevor. A livid reddish flaring in the sky showed Trevor the Korin's face, and it was smiling, as a wolf smiles before the kill. Then the thunder came, the downpour of rain, and he was thrust bodily into the doorway.

He stumbled over worn flagging in the utter dark, but the Korins moved sure-footedly as cats. He knew they had been here many times before, and he knew that they hated it. He could feel the hate and the fear bristling out from the bodies that were close to his, smell them in the close hot air. They didn't want to be here but they had to. They were bidden.

He would have fallen headforemost down the sudden flight of steps if someone had not caught his arm. They were huge steps. They were forced to go down them as small children do, lowering themselves bodily from tread to tread. A furnace blast of air came up the well, but in spite of the heat Trevor felt cold. He could feel how the hard stone of the stairs had been worn into deep hollows by the passing of feet. Whose feet? And going where?

A sulphurous glow began to creep up through the darkness. They went down what seemed a very long way. The glow brightened, so that Trevor could once more make out the faces of the Korins. The heat was overpowering, but still there was a coldness around Trevor's heart.

The steps ended in a long low hall, so long that the farther end of it was lost in vaporous shadow. Trevor thought that it must have been squared out of a natural cavern, for here and there in the rocky floor small fumaroles burned and bubbled, giving off the murky light and a reek of brimstone.

Along both sides of the hall were rows of statues seated in stone chairs.

Trevor stared at them, with the skin crawling up and down his back. Statues of men and women—or rather, of creatures

manlike and womanlike—sitting solemn and naked, their hands folded in their laps, their eyes, fashioned of dull, reddish stone, looking straight ahead, their features even and composed, with a strange sad patience clinging to the stony furrows around mouth and cheek. Statues that would be perhaps twenty feet tall if they were standing, carved by a master's chisel out of a pale substance that looked like alabaster.

Galt caught his arm. "Oh, no, you won't run away. You were laughing, remember? Come on, I want to see you laugh some more."

They forced him along between the rows of statues. Quiet statues, with a curiously ghostly look of thoughtfulness—of thoughts and feelings long vanished but once there, different from those of humans, perhaps, but quite as strong. No two of them were alike, in face or body. Trevor noted among them things seldom seen in statues, a maimed limb, a deformity, or a completely nondescript face that would offer neither beauty nor ugliness for an artist to enlarge upon. Also, they seemed all to be old, though he could not have said why he thought so.

There were other halls opening off this main one. How far they went he had no means of guessing, but he could see that in them were other shadowy rows of seated figures.

Statues. Endless numbers of statues, down here in the darkness underneath the city . . .

He stopped, bracing himself against his captors, gripping the hot rock with his bare feet.

"This is a catacomb," he said. "Those aren't statues, they're bodies, dead things sitting up."

"Come on," said Galt. "Come on, and laugh!"

They took him, and there were too many to fight. And Trevor knew that it was not them he had to fight. Something was waiting for him down in that catacomb. It had had his mind once. It would—

THEY were approaching the end of the long hall. The sickly light from the fumaroles showed the last of the lines of seated figures—had they died there like that, sitting up, or had they been brought here

afterward? The rows on each side ended evenly, the last chairs exactly opposite each other.

But against the blank end wall was a solitary seat of stone, facing down the full gloomy length of the hall, and on it sat a manlike shape of alabaster, very still, the stony hands folded rigidly upon the stony thighs. A figure no different from the others, except . . .

Except that the eyes were still alive.

The Korins dropped back a little. All but Galt. He stayed beside Trevor, his head bent, his mouth sullen and nervous, not looking up at all. And Trevor stared into the remote and sombre eyes that were like two pieces of carnelian in that pale alabaster face, and yet were living, sentient, full of a deep and alien sorrow.

It was very silent in the catacomb. The dreadful eyes studied Trevor, and for just a moment his hatred was tempered by a strange pity as he thought what it must be like for the brain, the intelligence behind those eyes, already entombed, and knowing it.

"A long living and a long dying. The blessing and the curse of my people."

The words were soundless, spoken inside his brain. Trevor started violently. Almost he turned to flee, remembering the torture of that moment in the canyon, and then he found that while he had been staring, a force as gentle and stealthy as the gliding of a shadow had already invaded him. And he was forbidden.

"At this range I do not need the sun-stones," murmured the silent voice within him. "Once I did not need them at all. But I am old."

Trevor stared at the stony thing that watched him, and then he thought of Jen, of Hugh lying dead with a dead hawk in the dust, and the strangeness left him, and his bitter passion flared again.

"So you hate me as well as fear me, little human? You would destroy me?" There was a gentle laughter inside Trevor's mind. "I have watched generations of humans die so swiftly. And yet I am here, as I was before they came, waiting."

"You won't be here forever," snarled Trevor. "These others like you died. You will!"

"Yes. But it is a slow dying, little human. Your body chemistry is like that of the plants, the beasts, based upon carbon. Quick to grow. Quick to wither away. Ours was of another sort. We were like the mountains, cousin to them, our body cells built of silicon, even as theirs. And so our flesh endures until it grows slow and stiff with age. But even then we must wait long, very long, for death."

Something of the truth of that long waiting came to Trevor, and he felt a shuddering thankfulness for the frailty of human flesh.

"I am the last," whispered the silent voice. "For a while I had companionship of minds, but the others are all gone before me, long ago."

Trevor had a nightmare vision of Mercury, in some incalculable future eon, a frozen world taking its last plunge into the burned-out sun, bearing with it these endless rows of alabaster shapes, sitting in their chairs of stone, upright in the dead blackness underneath the ice.

He fought back to reality, clutching his hatred as a swimmer clings to a plank, his voice raw with passion and bitterness as he cried out.

"Yes, I'll destroy you if I can! What else could you expect after what you've done?"

"Oh, no, little human, you will not destroy me. You will help me."

Trevor glared. "Help you? Not if you kill me!"

"There will be no killing. You would be of no use to me dead. But alive you can serve me. That is why you were spared."

"Serve you—like *them*?" He swung to point to the waiting Korins, but the Korins were not waiting now, they were closing in on him, their hands reaching for him.

Trevor struck out at them. He had a fleeting thought of how weird this battle of his with the Korins must look, as they struck and staggered on the stone paving beneath the looming, watching thing of stone.

But even as he had that thought, the moment of struggle ended. An imperious command hit his brain, and black oblivion closed down upon him like the sudden clenching of a fist.

V

DARKNESS. He was lost in it, and he was not himself any more. He fled through the darkness, groping, crying out for something that was gone. And a voice answered him, a voice that he did not want to hear. . . .

Darkness. Dreams.

Dawn, high on the blazing mountains. He stood in the city, watching the light grow bright and pitiless, watching it burn on the upper walls and then slip downward into the streets, casting heavy shadows in the openings of door and window, so that the houses looked like skulls with empty eye-holes and gaping mouths. The buildings no longer seemed too big. He walked between them, and when he came to steps he climbed them easily, and the window ledges were no higher than his head. He knew these buildings. He looked at each one as he passed, naming it, remembering with a long, long memory.

The hawks came down to him, the faithful servants with the sun-stones in their brows. He stroked their pliant necks, and they hissed softly with pleasure, but their shallow minds were empty of everything but that vague sensation. He passed on through the familiar streets, and in them nothing stirred. All through the day from dawn to sunset, and in the darkness that came afterward, nothing stirred, and there was a silence among the stones.

He could not endure the city. His time was not yet, though the first subtle signs of age had touched him. But he went down into the catacombs and took his place with those others who were waiting and could still speak to him with their minds, so that he should not be quite alone with the silence.

The years went by, leaving no traces of themselves in the unchanging gloom of the mortuary halls.

One by one those last few minds were stilled until all were gone. And by that time age had chained him where he was, unable to rise and go again into the city where he had been young, the youngest of all . . . Shannach, they had named him—The Last.

So he waited, alone. And only one who was kin to the mountains could have borne

that waiting in the place of the dead.

Then, in a burst of flame and thunder, new life came into the valley. Human life. Soft, frail, receptive life, intelligent, unprotected, possessed of violent and bewildering passions. Very carefully, taking its time, the mind of Shannach reached out and gathered them in.

Some of the men were more violent than the others. Shannach saw their emotions in patterns of scarlet against the dark of his inner mind. They had already made themselves masters, and a number of these frail sensitive brains had snapped out swiftly because of them. "These I will take for my own," thought Shannach. "Their mind-patterns are crude, but strong, and I am interested in death."

There had been a surgeon aboard the ship but he was dead. However, there was no need of a surgeon for what was about to be done. When Shannach had finished talking to the men he had chosen, telling them of the sun-stones, telling them the truth, but not all of it—when those men had eagerly agreed to the promise of power—Shannach took complete control. And the clumsy convict hands that moved now with such exquisite skill were as much his instruments as the scalpels of the dead surgeon that they wielded, making the round incision and the delicate cutting of the bone.

Who was the man that lay there, quiet under the knife? Who were the ones that bent above him, with the strange stones in their brows? Names. There are names and I know them. Closer, closer. I know that man who lies there with blood between his eyes . . .

Trevor screamed. Someone slapped him across the face, viciously and with intent. He screamed again, fighting, clawing, still blinded by the visions and the dark mists, and that voice that he dreaded so much spoke gently in his mind, "It's all over, Trevor. It is done."

The hard hand slapped him again, and a rough human voice said harshly, "Wake up. Wake up, damn it!"

He woke. He was in the middle of a vast room, crouched down in the attitude of a fighter, shivering, sweating, his hands outstretched and grasping nothing. He must have sprung there, half unconscious, from

the tumbled pallet of skins against the wall. Galt was watching him.

"Welcome, Earthman. How does it feel to be one of the masters?"

Trevor stared at him. A burning flood of light fell in through the tall windows so high above his head, setting the sun-stone ablaze between the Korin's sullen brows. Trevor's gaze fixed on that single point of brilliance.

"Oh, yes," said Galt. "It's true."

It struck Trevor with an ugly shock that Galt's lips had not moved, and that he had made no audible sound.

"The stones give us a limited ability," Galt went on, still without speaking aloud. "Not like His, of course. But we can control the hawks, and exchange ideas between us when we want to if the range isn't too far. Naturally, our minds are open to Him any time he wants to pry."

"There's no pain," Trevor whispered, desperately trying to make the thing not be so. "My head doesn't ache."

"Of course not. He takes care of that." *Shannach? If it isn't so, how do I know that name? And that dream, that endless nightmare in the catacombs.*

Galt winced. "We don't use that name. He doesn't like it." He looked at Trevor. "What's the matter, Earthman? Why so green? You were laughing once, remember? Where's your sense of humor now?"

He caught Trevor abruptly by the shoulders and turned him around so that he faced a great sheet of polished glassy substance set into the wall. A mirror for giants, reflecting the whole huge room, reflecting the small dwarfed figures of the men.

"Go on," said Galt, pushing Trevor ahead of him. "Take a look."

Trevor shook off the Korin's grasp. He moved forward by himself, close to the mirror. He set his hands against the chill surface and stared at what he saw there. And it was true.

Between his brows a sun-stone winked and glittered. And his face, the familiar, normal, not-too-bad face he had been used to all his life, was transformed into something monstrous and unnatural, a goblin mask with a third, and evil eye.

A coldness crept into his heart and bones. He backed away a little from the mir-

ror, his hands moving blindly upward, slowly toward the stone that glistened between his brows. His mouth was twisted like a child's, and two tears rolled down his cheeks.

His fingers touched the stone. And then the anger came. He sank his nails into his forehead, clawing at the hard stones, not caring if he died after he had torn it out.

Galt watched him. His lips smiled but his eyes were hateful.

BLOOD ran down the sides of Trevor's nose. The sun-stone was still there. He moaned and thrust his nails in deeper, and Shannach let him go until he had produced one stab of agony that cut his head in two and nearly dropped him. Then Shannach sent in the full force of his mind. Not in anger, for he felt none, and not in cruelty, for he was no more cruel than the mountain he was kin to, but simply because it was necessary.

Trevor felt that cold and lonely power roll down on him like an avalanche. He braced himself to meet it, but it broke his defenses, crushed them, made them nothing, and moved onward against the inmost citadel of his mind.

In that reeling, darkened fortress all that was wholly Trevor crouched and clung to its armament of rage, remembering dimly that once, in a narrow canyon, it had driven back this enemy and broken free. And then some crude animal instinct far below the level of conscious thought warned him not to press the battle now, to bury his small weapon and wait, letting this last redoubt of which he was yet master go untouched and perhaps unnoticed by his captor.

Trevor let his hands drop limply and his mind go slack. The cold black tide of power paused, and then he felt it slide away, withdrawing from those threatened walls. Out of the edges of it, Shannach spoke.

"Your mind is tougher than these valley-bred Korins. They're well conditioned, but you—you remember that you defied me once. The contact was imperfect then. It is not imperfect now. Remember that, too, Trevor."

Trevor drew in a long, unsteady breath. He whispered, "What do you want of me?"

"Go and see the ship. Your mind tells

me that it understands these things. See if it can be made to fly again."

That order took Trevor completely by surprise. "The ship! But why . . . ?"

Shannach was not used to having his wishes questioned, but he answered patiently, "I have still a while to live. Several of your short generations. I have had too much of this valley, too much of these catacombs. I want to leave them."

Trevor could understand that. Having had that nightmare glimpse into Shannach's mind, he could perfectly understand. For one brief moment he was torn with pity for this trapped creature who was alone in the universe. And then he wondered, "What would you do if you could leave the valley? What would you do to another settlement of men?"

"Who knows? I have one thing left to me—curiosity."

"You'd take the Korins with you, and the hawks?"

"Some. They are my eyes and ears, my hands and feet. But you object, Trevor."

"What difference does that make?" said Trevor bitterly. "I'll go look at the ship."

"Come on," said Galt, taking up an armful of torches. "I'll show you the way."

They went out through the tall door into the streets between the huge square empty houses. The streets and houses that Trevor had known in his dream, remembering when there were lights and voices in them. Trevor noticed only that Galt was leading him out on the opposite side of the city, toward the part of the valley he had never visited. And then his mind reverted to something that not even the shock of his awakening could drive out of his consciousness.

Jen.

A sudden panic sprang up in him. How long had it been since the darkness fell on him there in the catacomb? Long enough for almost anything to happen. He envisioned Jen being torn by hawks, of her body lying dead as Hugh's had lain, and he started to reach out for Galt, who had owned them both. But abruptly Shannach spoke to him, in that eerie silent way he was getting used to.

"The woman is safe. Here, look for yourself."

His mind was taken firmly and directed

into a channel completely new to him. He felt a curious small shock of contact, and suddenly he was looking down from a point somewhere in the sky at a walled paddock with a number of tiny figures in it. His own eyes would have seen them as just that, but the eyes he was using now were keen as an eagle's, though they saw no color but only black and white and the shadings in between. So he recognized one of the distant figures as Jen.

He wanted to get closer to her, much closer, and rather sulkily his point of vision began to circle down dropping lower and lower. Jen looked up. He saw the shadow of wide wings sweep across her and realized that of course he was using one of the hawks. He pulled it back so as not to frighten her, but not before he had seen her face. The frozen stoniness was gone, and in its place had come the look of a wounded tigress.

"I want her," Trevor said to Shannach.

"She belongs to Galt. I do not interfere."

Galt shrugged. "You're welcome. But keep her chained. She's too dangerous now for anything but hawk-meat."

THE ship was not far beyond the city. It lay canted over on its side, just clear of a low spur jutting out from the barrier cliff. It had hit hard, and some of the main plates were buckled, but from the outside the damage did not seem irreparable, if you had the knowledge and the tools to work with. Three hundred years ago it might have been made to fly again, only those who had the knowledge and the will were dead. And the convicts wanted to stay where they were.

The tough metal of the outer skin, alloyed to resist friction that could burn up a meteor, had stood up pretty well under three centuries of Mercurian climate. It was corroded, and where the breaks were the inner shells were eaten through with rust, but the hulk still retained the semblance of a ship.

"Will it fly?" asked Shannach eagerly.

"I don't know yet," Trevor answered.

Galt lighted a torch and gave it to him.

"I'll stay out here."

Trevor laughed. "How are you ever going

to fly over the mountains?"

"He'll see to that when the time comes," Galt muttered. "Take the rest of these torches. It's dark in there."

Trevor climbed in through the gaping lock, moving with great caution on the tilted, rust-red decks. Inside, the ship was a shambles. Everything had been stripped out of it that could be used, leaving only bare cubicles with the enamel peeling off the walls and a moldering litter of junk.

In a locker forward of the air lock he found a number of spacesuits. The fabric was rotted away, but a few of the helmets were still good and some half score of the oxygen bottles had survived, the gas still in them.

Shannach urged him on impatiently. "Get to the essentials, Trevor!"

The bridge room was still intact, though the multiple thickness of glassite in the big ports showed patterns of spidery cracks. Trevor examined the controls. He was strictly a planetary spacer, used to flying his small craft within spitting distance of the world he was prospecting, and there were a few gadgets here he didn't understand, but he could figure the board well enough.

"Not far, Trevor. Only over the mountains. I know from your mind—and I remember from the minds of those who died after the landing—that beyond the mountain wall there is a plain of dead rock, more than a hundred of your reckoning in miles, and then another ridge that seems solid but is not, and beyond that pass there is a fertile valley twenty times bigger than Korith, where Earthmen live."

"Only partly fertile, and the mines that brought the Earthmen are pretty well worked out. But a few ships still land there, and a few Earthmen still hang on."

"That is best. A small place, to begin . . ."

"To begin what?"

"Who can tell? You don't understand, Trevor. For centuries I have known exactly what I would do. There is a kind of rebirth in not knowing."

Trevor shivered and went back to studying the controls. The wiring, protected by layers of impervioplast insulation and conduit, seemed to be in fair shape. The generator room below had been knocked about,

but not too badly. There were spare batteries. Corroded, yes, But if they were charged, they could hold for a while.

"Will it fly?"

"I told you I don't know yet. It would take a lot of work."

"There are many slaves to do this work."

"Yes. But without fuel it's all useless."

"See if there is fuel."

The outlines of that hidden thing in Trevor's secret mind were coming clearer now. He didn't want to see them out in the full light where Shannach could see them too. He thought hard about generators, batteries, and the hooking up of leads.

He crept among the dark bowels of the dead ship, working toward the stern. The torch made a red and smoky glare that lit up deserted wardrooms and plundered holds. One large compartment had a heavy barred and bolted door that had bent like tin in the crash. "That's where they came from," Trevor thought, "like wolves out of a trap."

In the lower holds that had taken the worst of the impact were quantities of mining equipment and farm machinery, all smashed beyond use but formidable-looking none the less, with rusty blades and teeth and queer hulking shapes. They made him think of weapons, and he let the thought grow, adorning it with pictures of men going down under whirring reapers. Shannach caught it.

"Weapons?"

"They could be used as such. But the metal in them would repair the hull."

He found the fuel bunkers. The main supply was used to the last grain of fissionable dust, but the emergency bunkers still showed some content on the mechanical gauges. Not much, but enough.

VI

A HARD excitement began to stir in Trevor, too big to be hidden in that secret corner of his mind. He didn't try. He let it loose, and Shannach murmured.

"You are pleased. The ship will fly, and you are thinking that when you reach that other valley and are among your own people again, you will find means to destroy me. Perhaps, but we shall see."

In the smoky torchlight, looking down from a sagging catwalk above the firing chambers and the rusty sealed-in tubes, Trevor smiled. A lie could be thought as well as spoken. And Shannach, in a manner of speaking, was only human.

"I'll need help. All the help there is."

"You'll have it."

"It'll take time. Don't hurry me and don't distract me. Remember, I want to get over the mountains as bad you do."

Shannach laughed.

Trevor got more torches and went to work in the generator room. He felt that Shannach had withdrawn from him, occupied now with rounding up the Korins and the slaves. But he did not relax his caution. The open areas of his mind were filled with thoughts of vengeance to come when he reached that other valley.

Gradually the exigencies of wrestling with antiquated and partly ruined machinery drove everything else away. That day passed, and a night, a half another day before all the leads were hooked the way he wanted them, before one creaky generator was operating on one-quarter normal output, and the best of the spare batteries were charging.

He emerged from the torchlit obscurity into the bridge, blinking mole-like in the light, and found Galt sitting there.

"He trusts you," the Korin said, "but not too far."

Trevor scowled at him. Exhaustion, excitement, and a feeling of fate had combined to put him into an unreal state where his mind operated more or less independently. A hard protective shell had formed around that last little inner fortress so that it was hidden even from himself, and he had come almost to believe that he was going to fly this ship to another valley and battle Shannach there. So he was not surprised to hear Shannach say softly in his mind,

"You might try to go away alone. I wouldn't want that, Trevor."

Trevor grunted. "I thought you controlled me so well I couldn't spit if you forbade it."

"I am dealing with much here that I don't comprehend. We were never a mechanical people. Therefore some of your thoughts, while I read them clearly, have no real meaning for me. I can handle you, Trevor, but

I'm taking no chances with the ship."

"Don't worry," Trevor told him. "I can't possibly take the ship up before the hull's repaired. It would fall apart on me." That was true, and he spoke it honestly.

"Nevertheless," said Shannach, "Galt will be there, as my hands and feet, an extra guard over that object which you call a control-bank, and which your mind tells me is the key to the ship. You are forbidden to touch it until it is time to go."

Trevor heard Shannach's silent laughter.

"Treachery is implicit in your mind, Trevor. But I'll have time. Impulses come swiftly and cannot be read beforehand. But there is an interval between the impulse and the realization of it. Only a fraction of a second, perhaps, but I'll have time to stop you."

Trevor did not argue. He was shaking a little with the effort of not giving up his last pitiful individuality, of fixing his thoughts firmly on the next step toward what Shannach wanted and looking neither to the right nor to the left of it. He ran a grimy hand over his face, shrinking from the touch of the alien disfigurement in his forehead, and said sullenly,

"The holds have to be cleared. The ship won't lift that weight any more, and we need the metal for repairs." He thought again strongly of weapons. "Send the slaves."

"No," said Shannach firmly. "The Korins will do that. We won't put any potential weapons in the hands of the slaves."

Trevor allowed a wave of disappointment to cross his mind, and then he shrugged. "All right. But get them at it."

He went and stood by the wide ports looking out over the plain toward the city. The slaves were gathered at a safe distance from the ship, waiting like a herd of cattle until they should be needed. Some mounted Korins guarded them while the hawks wheeled overhead.

Coming toward the ship, moving with a resentful slowness, was a little army of Korins. Trevor could sense the group thought quite clearly. In all their lives they had never soiled their hands with labor, and they were angry that they had now to do the work of slaves.

Digging his nails into his palms, Trevor

went aft to show them what to do. He couldn't keep it hidden much longer, this thing that he had so painfully concealed under layers of half-truths and deceptions. It had to come out soon, and Shannach would know.

In the smoky glare of many torches the Korins began to struggle with the rusting masses of machinery in the after holds.

"Send more down here," Trevor said to Shannach. "These things are heavy."

"They're all there now except those that guard the slaves. They cannot leave."

"All right," said Trevor. "Make them work."

He went back up along the canting decks, along the tilted passages, moving slowly at first, then swifter, swifter, his bare feet scraping on the flakes of rust, his face, with the third uncanny eye, gone white and strangely set. His mind was throwing off muddy streams of thought, confused and meaningless, desperate camouflage to hide until the last second what was underneath.

"Trevor!"

That was Shannach, alert, alarmed.

It was coming now, the purpose, out into the light. It had to come, it could not be hidden any longer. It burst up from its secret place, one strong red flare against the darkness, and Shannach saw it, and sent the full cold power of his mind to drown it out.

Trevor came into the bridge room, running.

THE first black wave of power hit him, crushed him. The bridge room lengthened out into some weird dimension of delirium, with Galt waiting at the far end. Behind Galt the one small, little key that needed to be touched just once.

The towering might of Shannach beat him back, forbidding him to think, to move, to be. But down in that beleaguered part of Trevor's mind the walls still held, with the bright brand of determination burning in them.

This was the moment, the time to fight. And he dug up that armament of fury he had buried there. He let it free, shouting at the alien force, "I beat you once! I beat you!"

The deck swam under his feet. The peeling bulkheads wavered past like veils of

mist. He didn't know whether he was moving or not, but he kept on while the enormous weight bore down on his quivering brain, a mountain tilting, falling, seeking to smother out the fury that was all he had to fight with.

Fury for himself, defiled and outraged. Fury for Jen, with the red scars on her shoulders. Fury for Hugh lying dead under an obscene killer, fury for all the generations of decent people who had lived and died in slavery so that Shannach's time of waiting might be lightened.

He saw Galt's face, curiously huge, close to his own. It was stricken and amazed. Trevor's bared teeth glistened.

"I beat him once," he said to the Korin.

Galt's hands were raised. There was a knife in his girdle, but he had been bidden not to use it, not to kill. Only Trevor could make the ship to fly. Galt reached out and took him but there was an unsureness in his grip, and his mind was crying out to Shannach, "You could not make him stop! You could not!"

Trevor, who was partly merged with Shannach now, heard that cry and laughed. Something in him had burst wide open at Galt's physical touch. He had no control now, no sane thought left, but only a wild intense desire to do two things, one of which was to destroy this monster that had hold of him.

"Kill him," said Shannach suddenly. "He's mad, and no one can control an insane human."

Galt did his best to obey. But Trevor's hands were already around the Korin's throat, the fingers sinking deep into the flesh. There was a sharp snapping of bone.

He dropped the body. He could see nothing now except one tiny point of light in a reeling darkness. That single point of light had a red key in the center of it. Trevor reached out and pushed it down. That was the other thing.

For a short second nothing happened. Trevor sagged down across Galt's body. Shannach was somewhere else, crying warnings that came too late. Trevor had time to draw one harsh triumphant breath and brace himself.

The ship leaped under him. There was a dull roar, and then another, as the last

fuel bunkers let go. The whole bridge room rolled and came to rest with a jarring shock that split the ports wide open, and the world was full of the shriek and crash of metal being torn and twisted and rent apart. Then it quieted. The ground stopped shaking and the deck settled under Trevor. There was silence.

Trevor crawled up the new slope of the bridge room floor, to the shattered lock and through it, into the pitiless sunlight. He could see now exactly what he had done. And it was good. It had worked. That last small measure of fuel had been enough.

The whole after part of the hulk was gone, and with it had gone all but a few of Shannach's Korins, trapped in the lower holds.

And then, in pure surprise, Shannach spoke inside Trevor's mind. "I grow old indeed! I misjudged the toughness and the secrecy of a fresh, strong mind. I was too used to my obedient Korins."

"Do you see what's happening to the last of them?" Trevor asked savagely. "Can you see?"

The last of the Korins who had been outside with the slaves seemed to have been stunned and bewildered by the collapse of their world. And with the spontaneity of a whirlwind, the slaves had risen against this last remnant of their hated masters. They had waited for a long, long time, and now the Korins and the hawks were being done to death.

"Can you see it, Shannach?"

"I can see, Trevor. And—they're coming now for you!"

They were. They were coming, blood-mad against all who wore the sun-stone, and Jen was in the forefront of them, and Saul, whose hands were red.

Trevor knew that he had less than a half-minute to speak for his life. And he was aware that Shannach, still withdrawn, watched now with an edged amusement.

Trevor said harshly to Saul and all of them, "So I give you your freedom, and you want to kill me for it?"

Saul snarled, "You betrayed us in the cave, and now . . ."

"I betrayed you, but without intent. There was someone stronger than the Korins, that even you didn't know about. So how

should I have known?"

Trevor talked fast, then, talking for his life, telling them about Shannach and how the Korins themselves were enslaved.

"A lie," spat Saul.

"Look for yourselves in the crypts underneath the city! But be careful."

He looked at Jen, not at Saul. After a moment Jen said slowly, "Perhaps there is a—Shannach. Perhaps that's why we were never allowed in the city, so the Korins could go on pretending that they were gods."

"It's another of his lies, I tell you!"

Jen turned to him. "Go and look, Saul. We'll watch him."

Saul hesitated. Finally, he and a half-dozen others went off toward the city.

Trevor sat down on the hot, scorched grass. He was very tired, and he didn't like at all the way the withdrawn shadow of Shannach hovered just outside his mind.

The mountains leaned away from the Sun, and the shadows crawled up the lower slopes. Then Saul and the others returned.

Trevor looked up at their faces and laughed without mirth. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Saul, and shivered. "Yes . . ."

"Did he speak to you?"

"He started to. But—we ran."

And Saul suddenly cried, out of the depths of fear this time and not of hate, "We can never kill him. It's his valley. And oh God, we're trapped in here with him, we can't get out."

"We can get out," said Trevor.

VII

SAUL stared at him sickly. "There's no way over the mountains. There isn't even air up there."

"There's a way. I found it in the ship."

Trevor stood up, speaking with a sudden harshness. "Not a way for us all, not now, but if three or four of us go, one may live to make it. And he could bring back men with ships for the others."

He looked at Saul. "Will you try it with me?"

The gaunt man said hoarsely, "I still don't trust you, Trevor! But anything—anything, to get away from *that* . . ."

"I'll go too," Jen said suddenly. "I'm as strong as Saul."

That was true, and Trevor knew it. He stared at her for a long minute, but he could not read her face.

Saul shrugged. "All right."

"But it's all craziness!" murmured a voice. "You can't breathe up there on the ridges. There's no air!"

Trevor climbed painfully into what was left of the twisted wreck, and brought out the helmets and oxygen bottles that had survived for just this purpose.

"We'll breathe," he said. "These—" He tried for a word that would explain to them. "—these containers hold an essence of air. We can take them with us and breathe."

"But the cold?"

"You have tanned skins, haven't you? And gums? I can show you how to make us protective garments. Unless you'd rather stay here with Shannach."

Saul shivered a little. "No, we'll try it."

In all the hours that followed—while the women of the slaves worked with soft tanned skins and resinous gums, while Trevor labored over the clumsy helmets they must have—in all that time, Shannach was silent.

Silent, but not gone, Trevor felt that shadow on his mind, he knew that Shannach was watching. Yet the Last One made no attempt upon him.

The slaves watched him, too. He saw the fear and hatred still in their eyes as they looked at the sun-stone between his brows.

And Jen watched him, and said nothing, and he could read nothing at all in her face. Was she thinking of Hugh and how the hawks had come?

By mid-afternoon they were ready. They started climbing slowly, toward the passes that went up beyond the sky. He and Saul and Jen were three grotesque and shapeless figures, in the three-layered garments of skin that were crudely sealed with gum, and the clumsy helmets that were padded out with cloth because there was no collar-rest to hold them. Their faces were wrapped close, and they held the ends of the oxygen tubes in their mouths because no amount of ingenuity could make the helmets space-tight.

The evening shadow flowed upward from the valley floor as they climbed, and the men who had come to help them dropped back. These three went on, with Saul leading the

way and Trevor last.

And still Shannach had not spoken.

The atmosphere slipped behind them. They were climbing into space now, tiny creatures clambering up an infinity of virgin rock, in the utter black between the blazing peaks above and the flaring lightnings of the evening storm below.

Up and up toward the pass, toiling forward painfully with each other's help where no man could have made it alone, through a numbing and awful cold and silence. Three clumsy, dragging figures, up here above the sky itself, walking in the awfulness of infinity, where the rocks their feet dislodged rushed away as noiseless as a dream, where there was no sound, no light, no time.

Trevor knew they must have reached the pass, for on both sides now there rose up slopes that had never been touched by wind or rain or living root. He staggered on, and presently the ground began to drop and the way was easier. They had passed the crest. And the oxygen was almost gone.

Downward now, stumbling, slipping, sliding, yearning toward the air below. And they were on the other side of the mountain, above the plain of rock that led to . . .

And then, at last, Shannach—laughed.

"Clever," he said. "Oh, very clever, to escape without a ship! But you will come back, with a ship, and you will take me to the outside world. And I will reward you greatly."

"No," said Trevor, in his mind. "No, Shannach. If we make it, the sun-stone comes out, and we'll come back for the slaves, not for you!"

"No, Trevor." The gentle finality of that denial was coldly frightening. "You are mine now. You surprised and tricked me once, but I know the trick now. Your whole mind is open to me. You cannot withstand me ever again."

It was cold, cold in the darkness below the pass, and the chill went deep into Trevor's soul and froze it.

Saul and Jen were below him now, stumbling down along the rock-strewn lip of a chasm, into the thin high reaches of the air, into sound and life again. He saw them tear away their helmets. He followed them, pulling off his own, gasping the frigid breath into his starved lungs. Shannach said softly,

"We do not need them any longer. They would be a danger when you reach other men. Dispose of them, Trevor."

Trevor started a raging refusal, and then his mind was gripped as by a great hand, shaken and turned and changed. And his fury flowed away into blankness.

"But of course," he thought. "*There are many boulders, and I can topple them into the chasm so easily . . .*"

He started toward a jagged stone mass, one that would quite neatly brush the two clumsy figures below him into the abyss.

"That is the way, Trevor! But quickly—!"

Trevor knew that Shannach had spoken truth, and that this time he was conquered.

"No, I won't!" he cried to himself, but it was only a weak echo from a fading will-power, a dying self.

"You will, Trevor! And now! They suspect."

Saul and Jen had turned. Trevor's face, open now to the numbing cold which he could scarcely feel, must have told them everything. They started scrambling back up toward him. Only a short distance, but they would be too late.

Trevor shrieked thinly, "Look out—Shannach . . . !"

He had his hands on it now, on the boulder he must roll to crush them.

But there was another way! He was Shannach's while he lived, but there was a way to avoid again betraying Jen's people, and that way was to live no longer.

He used the last of his dying will to pitch himself toward the brink of the chasm. Hundreds of feet below a man could lie quiet on the rocks through all eternity.

"Trevor, no! No!"

Shannach's powerful command halted him as he swayed on the very edge. And then Jen's arms caught him from behind.

He heard Saul's voice crying, thin and harsh in that upper air, "Push him over! He's a Korin. You saw his face!"

Jen answered, "No! He tried to kill himself for us!"

"But Shannach has him!" Saul cried out.

Shannach had him, indeed, stamping down that final flicker of Trevor's revolt, fiercely commanding him.

"Slay the woman and the man!"

Trevor tried to. He was all Shannach's

now. He tried earnestly and with all his strength to kill them, but both the woman and the man had hold of him now. They were too strong for him, and he could not obey the Last One as he wanted to.

"Tie his arms!" Jen was shouting. "We can take him, and he can't do us any harm!"

The anger of Shannach flooded through Trevor, and he raged and struggled, and it was useless. Strips of hide secured his arms and they were dragging him on down out of the mountains, and he could not obey. He could not!

And then he felt the anger of Shannach ebb away into a terrible hopelessness. Trevor felt his own consciousness going, and he went into the darkness bearing in his mind the echo of that last bitter cry,

"I am old—too old . . ."

VIII

TREVOR awakened slowly, rising above the dark sea of oblivion only to sink again, conscious in those brief intervals that he lay in a bed and that his head ached.

There came a time when he rose, not to sink again. After a while his eyes opened, and he saw a metal ceiling.

"We made it," he said.

"Yes, you made it," said a friendly voice. "This is Solar City. You've been here quite a while."

Trevor turned his head to the voice, to the white-jacketed doctor beside his bed. But he didn't see the man or the room. Not at first. He saw only, upon the bedside table in a tray, a tawny eye that winked and glittered at him.

A sun-stone.

His hand started to rise weakly to his face. The doctor forestalled him.

"Don't bother. It's out. And a delicate job getting it out, it was. You'll have a headache for a while, but anyone would take a headache for a sun-stone!"

Trevor didn't answer that. He said suddenly, "Jen—and Saul . . . ?"

"They're here. Pretty odd folk they are, too. Won't talk to any of us. You're all a blazing mystery, you know."

He went away. When he came back, Jen and Saul were with him. They wore modern synthecloth garments now. Jen looked as

incongruous in hers as a leopardess in a silk dress.

She saw the smile in his eyes and cried, "Don't laugh at me—ever!"

It occurred to Trevor that civilizing her would take a long time. He doubted if it would ever be done. And he was glad of that.

She stood looking gravely down at him and then said, "They say you can get up tomorrow."

"That's good," said Trevor.

"You'll have to be careful for a while."

"Yes. I'll be careful."

They said no more than that, but in her steady, grave gaze Trevor read that Hugh and the hawks were forgiven, not forgotten but forgiven, that they two had touched each other and would not let go again.

Saul cried anxiously, "Days we've waited! When can we go back to the valley with a ship for the others?"

Trevor turned to the curiously-watching doctor. "Can I charter a ship here?"

"A man with a sun-stone can get almost anything he wants, Trevor! I'll see about it."

The chartered ship that took them back to the valley had a minimum crew, and two mining technicians Trevor had hired. They set down outside the ancient city, and the slaves came surging toward them, half in eagerness, half in awe of this embodiment of misty legend.

Trevor had told Saul what to do. Out up the valley, in the skulls of slain Korins, were sun-stones worth many fortunes. They were going out with the slaves.

"But they're evil—evil!" Saul had cried.

"Not in the outside worlds," Trevor told him. "You people are going to need a start somewhere."

When that was done, when they were all in the ship, Trevor nodded to the two mining technicians.

"Now," he said. "The entrance to the catacomb is right over there."

The two went away, carrying their bulky burden slung between them. Presently they came back again without it.

Trevor took his sun-stone from his pocket. Jen clutched his arm and cried, "No!"

"There's no danger now," he said. "He hasn't time enough left to do anything with me. And—I feel somehow that I should tell him—"

He put the sun-stone to his brow, and in his mind he cried,

"Shannach!"

And into his mind came the cold, tremendous presence of the Last One. In an instant it had read Trevor's thoughts.

"So this is the end, Trevor?"

"Yes," Trevor said steadily. "The end."

He was braced for the wild reaction of alarm and passion, the attempt to seize his mind, to avert doom.

It didn't come. Instead, from the Last One, came a stunning pulse of gladness, of mounting joy.

"Why—why, you *want* me to do this?" Trevor cried.

"Yes, Trevor! Yes! I had thought that the centuries of waiting for death would be long yet, and lonely. But this, this will free me now!"

Dazed by surprise, Trevor slowly made a gesture, and their ship throbbed upward into the sky. Another gesture, and the technician beside him reached toward the key of the radio-detonator.

In that moment he felt the mind of Shannach crying out as in a vast, mingled music, a glad chorus of release against chords of cosmic sorrow for all that had been and would never be again, for the greatest and oldest of races that was ending.

The receding city below erupted flame and rock around the catacomb mouth as the key was pressed.

And the song of Shannach ebbed into silence, as the last of the children of mountains went forever into night.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

FOR ANDY'S SAKE

2728 N. Magnolia
Chicago, 14, Ill.

but they are usually nothing but a nothing hiding behind a stupid name, a lot of doubletalk, and a sickening air of cuteness. Not so, the Wub. The Wub lives. It is so real it flops right off the page and lies, slobbering and discussing philosophy, in your lap.

THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS was well above average, too. A sound STF idea in the background, and still it moves. As other mags turn to detective STF, Love STF, Woman's Home Companion STF, and anything else calculated to kill the Golden Goose of Science-Fiction by disguising it as something else, it becomes increasingly clear that PLANET, for all its faults, is one of the only mags still running the sort of stuff that made Science-Fiction great.

STF can stand some improvement, but improvement in the way of purification, not dilution. For instance, I'd like to see that old clinker, the spacebum, either given a new slant or dumped out the nearest spaceport. That's my purple hope, and I won't change it for all the Wealth of Echindul.

I haven't yet been able to bring myself to read BRIDE OF THE DARK ONE. Those Inevitable Rider Haggard priests scared me off.

FROZEN HELL I did read, and while the BEM seemed more than somewhat similar to the movie THING, it at least was a newer stereotype than those old princesses, priests, and spacebums. Likewise ACID BATH was readable, but little more. Haven't read MOONDOG yet, despite the cover. I've gradually been building an aversion to Mullen based on small inconsistencies and slipups in his plots that never fail to annoy me out of enjoying his otherwise excellent writing.

I've seen Mayan's work in the POST, and, tho it certainly was wonderful, particularly as it was in color, I fear it means no more Mayan for PLANET. I hope I'm wrong, because I still believe him to be the finest artist in science-fiction. (Yes, I've seen Finlay.) Could you possibly get him back? Offer him a cover. Offer him, if you'll pardon the expression, money, but get him back. After seeing what he can do in color, I rather think giving him a cover would be a good idea in more ways than one. That man cannot only draw pictures; he can, I'll bet, draw customers.

As to La Vizi, give first to Ned Reece, a fellow Paul lover, tho I fear that Paul is either dead or retired and that those few things of his that have appeared have been holdovers from the dim but glorious past. Second to Mr. U: I have always come out flatly in favor of babes on the cover, not because they help sell the mag, but because I am one of those strange beasts that likes to look at females. I only wish they were better drawn. Nobody objects to a really well drawn fem. Hardly anyone, anyway. Would these cover cleaner-uppers blue pencil Titian? If Mayan did the babe on the cover, nobody would kick if she was stark nekkid, and man, would you ever sell magazines!

Philip Brantingham disqualifies himself with that crack about "a dark age of surrealism and modernness," so give third to Arthur Stone, tho I don't agree with him, either. On the whole, this Vizi suffers from an overdose of amateur theology and philosophy. What happened to the old guard humorists that used to send pretentious towers of "logic" crashing with a single well-aimed wisecrack?

Yerz,

RADELL FARADAY NELSON, BCM.

Ed's note: Yeah, what happened?

Dear Editor:

As I am very familiar with Murphy Anderson's magazine and newspaper work, I would like to state my opinion, which is, that he is the best illustrator and cartoonist living today. I only wish I had the opportunity to tell him so personally.

These past few years I've been reading nothing but cracks and criticisms in the VIZIGRAPH about the covers. It seems as if no one has the guts to praise or stick up for Anderson.

All I want to say before I end this letter is "keep Anderson on all your covers, and how about a couple more of his interior illos?"

Sincerely,

WM. DICHTL

Ed's note: This is as good a time as any to clear up the case of THE GREAT ANDERSON CONFUSION. Murphy Anderson, God bless him and love him, has not (due to other commitments) contributed any art work to PLANET in several years. When I see him again, William, I'll gladly inform him of your stout allegiance to his cause. Our much maligned and much praised cover artist is Allen Anderson, master of the brush and purveyor of the feminine form. Claims he enjoys the tirades launched agin him. The writer sometimes mixed up in this case is Poul Anderson. If Poul is as good an artist as he is a writer then he's been keeping it a dark secret

HELL AND HOT WATER

3817 12th Avenue,
Brooklyn 17, N. Y.

Dear Ed:

Not having written a VIZI-letter in the age of several dogs, I enter diffidently, yanking at my forelock. But I would have words with friend Farnsworth who writes in the July ish. He expresses what I feel is a stupid and dangerous idea, quite current among people who don't realize its danger as far as human progress is concerned. This is "that the belief that there is no Hell doesn't help morals . . ." If, in other words, there isn't any Hell, we should still terrify the young with a belief in a false conception in order to keep them straight.

I say this idea is a dangerous one, because most of our present planet-wide mess did not arise from any general dispensing with myths and unscientific beliefs—just the opposite. Stalinism is a myth, obviously false, unless you have been brought up to believe in it. The same, I regret to say, is true of many other systems of thought that some people will defend with much vim. They're myths, harmful, obviously untrue, and completely useless as a means of guiding anybody in a healthy way of life.

While we're talking about Health, since Mr. Reynolds mentions "a healthy people" who "must have something to strive for"—is it healthy, Mr. Reynolds, to live in squalor and ignorance because you think you're going somewhere nice after you're dead? What's wrong with cushioned ease? I notice that many an advocate of the strenuous and moral life condemns himself to martyrdom in wealth so that lots of other people can have the advantages of being poor and good.

The easy way out which Mr. Reynolds criticizes is not what he thinks it is. It is really the acceptance of what you have been told is right and proper, the way

of living that everybody else follows, without any examination into it to see if "what everybody does" really makes much sense after all.

Doing things in the accepted way, being careful not to be different, can involve acceptance of murder and slavery for other people if you happen to live in a society where that's normal. And there have been some. It means, in the U. S., never criticizing for fear somebody might call you a Communist. Never protest anything you think is wrong, even if you think that what "everybody is doing" is in direct violation of principles that everybody (the same everybody) loyally and loudly defend. In the long run, the philosophy of the easy way, which Mr. Reynolds is advocating in the same breath that he attacks it, is the trouble with humanity.

No, I don't like heavy taxes. Yes, I want more benefits. And positively yes, I'm in favor of a future where people loaf a lot. There's nothing that I can see that's wrong with plenty of material goods, an easy morality, and a lack of belief in Hell. The societies that practised those things got along fine until noble souls who believed in the double standard, in gunpowder, in slavery, and naturally in Hell, came to impose their notions on the peaceful and innocent amorality. The Stalinist is a moral man, incidentally; his sexual life is chillier than Cotton Mather's, except for those rare occasions when he must coldbloodedly use biology for the Party's ends.

To return to the front end of Mr. Reynold's letter—"the stricter they believe God to be, the stricter their morals will be." Nope. A little study of comparative societies would quickly show you that morals are almost directly dependent on the food supply. The Greeks could, at one and the same time, worship Aphrodite and criticize Pericles for his goin's on with Aspasia. And if you don't think Greek morals were dependent on the food supply, I'd like to know what they were dependent on.

Enough. Pass the mead, fellow pagans. We drink from the skull of the unhappy Reynolds. Gulp! Frantically,

D. V. STANLEY

HANDS UP, SAPIRO!

546 Ellis
Wichita 9, Kansas

To the Editor:

Well, well, well! So Mr. Sapiro is after my scalp, eh? Have to give him credit for his masterful flow of language. In fact, I haven't heard a tirade of equal refinement and culture since the newspaperman spoke about Maggie's voice.

But, dem it, why doesn't he give the details? I am sure that the whole world must be eagerly awaiting the story of how I snuck the rat poison into Mao Tung's chop suey. Or maybe they want to hear how I killed the Dead Sea. Come on, we are all ears.

However, while he is trying to tell all about me, I have a little nursery rhyme of my own to recite. A few months back I had managed to save up a few dollars to put in my savings account. I laid the money on my bedroom table to await a chance to deposit it and went to bed. Just about daybreak a burglar sneaked into the room. I grabbed for my equalizer and he grabbed for the Wild Blue Yonder.

To put it crudely, he took his foot in hand and skeedaddled. I don't know when he stopped running but it must have been some distance away for the police couldn't find him. Afterward, I picked up off the floor some personal papers the burglar had

dropped. They bore the identity of a Mr. Sapiro of Berkeley, California.

I leave it to the other readers to draw a connection between this nocturnal visit and Mr. Sapiro's rage as expressed in the September Planet. I can't blame my visitor for scrambling, though, for the mouth of my .45 is almost as big as Leland's.

EDWIN SIGLER

EVERYBODY GETS IN THE ACT

c/o F. Pohl,
220 5th Ave.,
New York 1, N. Y.

Dear J. O.:

So you did it. You gave me an original. *An original!* ME! May the sun of Connecticut shine ever warmly but not hotly 'round thy noble brow.

I will happily relieve you of the Vestal for BEYOND LIES THE WUB.

Speaking of Connecticut, what's with the address? The agency notification said "Mayflower Gardens," and here you are on "Summer Street." J. O., you get back where you belong this instant!

Let's get into the hatchet job on the September PLANET.

About the cover—what's your price? For the original, I mean. Who do I knock off to get it? Boy, PLANET just ain't had a cover like this before. By gum, it's a pleasure to see some work that combines good color technique with draftsmanship, for a change. Unless Fiction House has changed, all the credit for its being in existence belongs to you, too. Consider your back patted and your hand shook. I also hope the layoff has given Anderson time to do a more careful than usual job on his next, and I pray to T. T. Scott that there'll be more Vestals.

Contents: Oooh, Mama, lookit all the pseudo-nyums!

In order of merit:

THE STAR PLUNDERER and EVIL OUT OF ONZAR, deadlocked. Ganes was slick, but Anderson put in a lot more thought. Ganes sort of outskicked himself, but then, Anderson didn't build enough. It all adds up to a point where one story's shortcomings balance off the other's. I think Andy should have written his longer, though, and Ganes' should have been chopped.

Next, ZERO DATA, closely followed by THE SLAVES OF VENUS. Something didn't come off with ZERO cutting?—and SLAVES never had it.

It used to be there was one decent short to an issue, anyway. What happened here? The Dick story had no plot, the Williams deal would have been better off without one, and THE BIG PILL—ah, yes, THE BIG PILL. Apt title, that. You must have chuckled over it for hours.

I'll say this for your longer stories—they move, and rapidly. I guess they have to.

Which brings us to the "Get Anderson!" movement. I don't get it. He hasn't written a dud yet, even if A. A. Craig did slap my wrist a while back. He turns out a nice, dependable job, even if he does insist on pounding the drum of cyclic history. (Always interlard your bouquets with a brickbat, I always say. What do you always say?) Ah, well, I guess we're all hacks in the artistic shade of such lit'ry joints as used to grace the mags in the good old days.

Which, for no good reason, brings me to Gregg Calkins, of whom I am now going to make a lifelong enemy.

Grigori, thou knowest it not, but thou vocalizest

through thy kepi. For my dough, you are a revolving snob.

Point for point on the Calkins letter, thusly:

(1) The advertising value of fanzines to promags is negligible, for the simple reason that anyone in sufficient contact with STF to read fanmags knows all about the prozines, and either buys all or most of them automatically, or else has long since picked his favorites and couldn't be budged into buying anything else with nitro.

(2) Newspaper publicity for worldcons is ludicrous. They generally draw half a column in one edition, and that on page twenty. If the mat for the liver pill ad comes in, out goes the stfcen publicity. Don't kid yourself, Calkins. Maybe if a Sirian delegation arrived, then. (Sirius, that is, and in a multicolored flying saucer with suitable pyrotechnics and cacophony.) Even then, we'd probably be squeezed out by the International Chess Tournament results.

(3) Look, pal, why is it everybody thinks you just sit down behind a dictaphone and watch the cylinder fill up? You got a right to like or dislike stories, and to say so, and, on occasion, fan criticism may be of some technical use, but fiction writing is a craft, with involved techniques, and just saying a story stinks, or is a "classic," is of absolutely no value to the poor slaves trying to build or buy better stories. Nobody's looking down his nose at you, either, but you wouldn't expect your comments on the artistic lines of a bridge to be of value to an engineer trying to compute sheer strength, would you?

Sam Merwin came right out, took his life in his hands, and told you why promags run fan columns. They amuse the general rent-paying readers no end. Being a fringe phenomenon bears no stigma. The laugh's on the non-fen for supporting space devoted to activities completely unconnected with their interests. Sit back. Enjoy yourself. But remember that all of organized fandom is a little grain of sand on the shore of a more or less mighty ocean of greenbacks. The only obligation the promags have to any of us is no more than the moral obligation of any publication to any group of steady readers. So quit trying to say that fandom could bring more than moral pressure on an editor. Financially, Greg, we're not even worth directing special ads to, in this particular market.

And now, Calkins, the blow. I speak as a fan—as one fan, with no mysterious "we" behind me.

Just when was it, lad, that God reached down and touched his index finger to your forehead? Where do you get the nerve to build a picket fence around fandom? And having built it, where did you dredge up the further gall to stand within the pale and smugly make nasty faces at Mrs. Corby? Who gave you Saint Peter's old job?

Just who do you speak for when you smugly declare who qualifies to be a fan and who doesn't? Chum, I was in this racket before you were. Who let you in? Well, you're in, the same way I got in, by inviting myself, and you stay the same way I stay—by liking it well enough to stick at it. The rules didn't suddenly change after Mrs. Calkins' little boy plunked his round bottom on the bench. There was a fandom before you tore off your first sexy cover, and there'll be one after you're too old to appreciate them.

Personally, I'm proud and happy to know, even through the tenuous link of the VIZIGRAPH, a reader like Mrs. Corby, who had enough common sense to come out and speak her mind instead of following meekly along behind would-be arbiters like you.

Pin that up over your framed picture of Captain Video, pal.

Write me a letter sometime, lad. I like your fan-mag, and I still can't figure out how you managed to work your way that far out into left field.

Which brings us to Leland Sapiro, who would also be of the Chosen Ones. Sigler is—well, he's Sigler. I've gotten some weird mail from the boy, some of it mentioning "Leland Sapiro," and I imagine Leland has, too. Nevertheless, the fallacy in this not-quite-complete lifting of an old JWC Jr. editorial lies in the fact that the serious/nonserious consequences criterion for the validity of personal opinion requires an omniscient, apassionate being to establish the dichotomy. I'm pretty sure O'Sullivan isn't a Slan, Leland, so suppose we let him take his magazine down the road to hell anyway he chooses to, and when another Sigler letter turns up in the Vizigraph, you can just cover your eyes and escape the contaminating influence that way. Or, are you a Slan?

Sounds like I hate everybody, doesn't it? As a matter of fact, I'm a lovable guy at heart, but whenever somebody comes around advocating the abrogation of the right to hold and declare personal opinion, I remember that I got out of Europe one jump ahead of people who were doing the same thing.

Gotta run. I'm gonna go right out and be a radio-television technician. I'll stop long enough to vote for Mavis Hartman Female, Helen Huber, PLANET'S Own Clipping Bureau, and Bob Flint, even if he does lose his head over Bradbury. In that order, and doesn't it hurt to know nobody gets the cover originals?

Ain't Fandom Wonderful?

A. J. BUDRYS

DREAMERS ALL

906 North D Street
Poplar Bluff, Missouri

My Dear Editor:

While I am writing this letter I think of many things, including what I am writing about.

First off, I wish to pay special recognition to Martin Gross for a thoroughly dislikable letter. Though I most assuredly agree with many of his opinions I find him on the whole ridiculously radical.

Second, I would like to comment on Philip Brantingham's third argument. In my opinion there is no such scale as basic intelligence and no such animal as the average American. We like to think of things like the latter existing for convenience sake and for one's own personal desires. As for his charge that the American morals have sunk to an all time low in their reading of lewd trash, I will not try to argue for or reconcile the publication of what he defines the latter as but I would like to point out that it is read by those listed in the social register and the police register.

Third, what is all this talk about PS not keeping up with its standards. It has never laid claim nor shown any attempt toward being arty. Though many a time I have sighed with pleasure after finishing some of the stories.

PS would please me by changing its covers; not the artists but the composition and theme.

The covers usually consist of a half-naked girl, a fighting man, and a bem or celestial object or both; tries to depict the girl as a hell-cat or damsel in distress in loud colors. Now, I personally have nothing against the continuation of the female part since it helps the magazine's circulation, not to forget mine, but could not she be drawn to take up less than half

the page? Also, could not the theme be pictorial or at least reasonably surrealistic?

Fourth and last, I would like to give my idea of what a SF reader is. He is a dreamer of a sort, one who has grown tired of looking at the present earth, a person who can look at the sky on a dark clear night and see more than a myriad of twinkling lights; millions of rhythmic sensory vibrations telling him of matters beyond mortal knowledge, subjects that appertain to creations, to utopias, to life. Magazines such as PLANET have provided one interpretation of these waves that are without diameter or circumference to the reader.

If I have offended anyone I thank you for bearing with me this far.

Yours,

J. DEAN CLARK

GANGWAY, THRILL-SEEKERS!

1517 Lincoln Avenue
Calumet City, Illinois

Dear Jack:

This unworthy person is going to tiptoe by the Bradbury feud which runs on unabated. Apparently it is endless.

So, students, today's lecture is going to deal with SPACE-OPERA . . .

First I'm going to offer a definition, or rather a dogmatic statement: writing really comes under two separate headings—Good Literature and Trivia. Good Literature is the type of writing that everyone enjoys reading. It is the author's best work, and the publisher and editor are proud to be associated with the work. Trivia has subheadings such as detective, love, space-opera, gimmick, etc. Trivia is entertaining (occasionally) but, like the money you spent for it, here today—gone tomorrow. Usually the author has tried to prove himself a tough, smart superman rather than taking history as an art form and making it readable to all.

Unfortunately Good Literature is scarce today. Not only in the pulp field but in the slicks and the hard cover world of publishing. Modern classics like BLOOD BROTHER, GRAPES OF WRATH, THEATRE, FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS and MOON AND SIXPENCE, are rare occurrences. The public is no longer looking for good books . . . only for the ones which will give them the most thrills.

Why is this modern day world set on thrill-seeking? They turn from boxing to wrestling to auto racing. From vaudeville to motion pictures to television. One asks why ACROSS THE RIVER AND INTO THE TREES is not acclaimed a literary sensation. Perhaps it is because the public prefers to read Mike Hammer.

Science-fiction has had a widespread influence in the literary world, but it has failed in every respect to raise any standards. It shies from reality. The attempts of a few to put emotion in their work were cheered with a good deal of noise, then forgotten. Human beings do not exist in science-fiction, merely a few statues to act as dupes in order to fill the trick ending.

The fault basically does not lie with the writers but with the industry itself. After all, trash is only printed because the editor accepts it, and usually the editor is intelligent enough to know it is poor material. Low word rates also make a difference. Then, of course, there are publishers' taboos.

Your magazine, Jack, is not perfect. Besides Good Literature you sometimes print space-opera. It seems, also, that in makeup the mag needs work done. But I'll always be a purchaser. One thing about the editors, in the past and present of PS: they have never been obnoxious . . . a hard thing to come by in sf-dom.

Yours respectfully,

PHILIP BRANTINGHAM

CALLING ALL AIRWAYS

6528 Gentry Ave.
No. Hollywood, Calif.

Dear Editor:

I'd like to begin my letter with a reply to the letter published in September PLANET STORIES from Wm. Mullarkey, Jr. To summarize, he stated that sf's greatest medium, radio, had dropped its two best shows, DIMENSION "X" and 200 PLUS. That, of course, is so. He also said that sf-dom should write in about it. Well for one, I did. The night that DIMENSION "X" went off the air, I wrote to NBC to find out whohappen. The reply said that DIMENSION "X" had been tried many times before, without success. I'm mad! What do they mean, without success?

I agree with Mr. Mullarkey that radio is a good means to spread sf. C'mon fen, let's sit down and write to the radio stations about this. Also, whatever happened to CBS' OUT THERE television series? This show was equal to, if not better than TALES OF TOMORROW. They had many big stories; Heinlein's THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH, and MISFIT, plus Bradbury's THE MAN, and many more.

Science fiction is a tender subject with me. I'm for it, in every form. I'm a completist (foolish boy!), a semi-active fan, an avid reader and an amateur dealer.

I managed to get some old issues of PLANET the other day and was surprised at the number of people who wrote letters that sounded so like those of present days, only transformed to modern subjects. Like the one letter from a guy who complained about authors using "fantastic and impossible" weapons, capable of killing many thousands of people at a time . . . this letter was written in 1942. Wasn't there a thing in '45, the "A-Bomb" or something like that?

Why is PLANET so good? Because in this technical age, people want to read something where they don't have to concentrate on time-machines, paradoxes, neutro-rays, galactic warfare, and complicated workshop gadgets. Let's get back to the three "A's" of sf, Action, Adventure, and Artistry.

Adventurously yours,

PAUL NOWELL

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